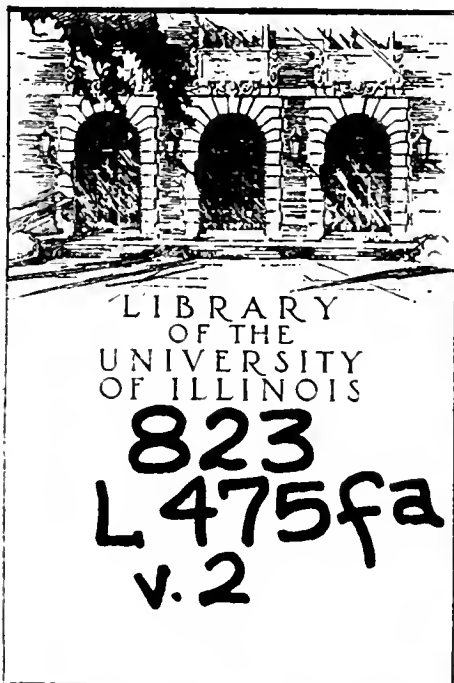
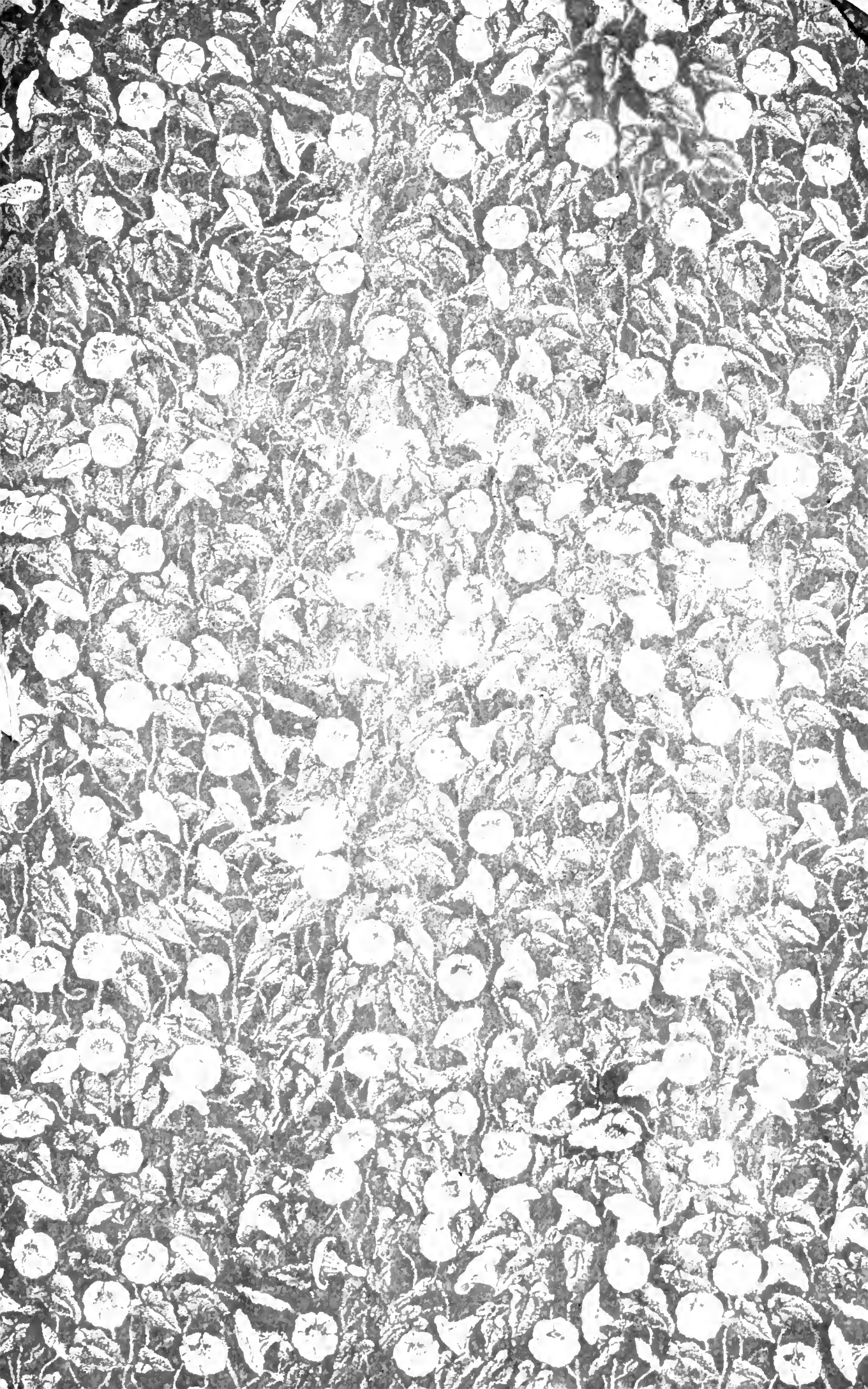


Denique Caelum.

William Melville.

No. 1215







# A FATAL SILENCE



# A FATAL SILENCE

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT

AUTHOR OF

'LOVE'S CONFLICT,' 'VÉRONIQUE,' ETC., ETC., ETC.

*IN THREE VOLUMES*

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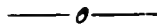
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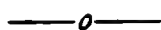
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# A FATAL SILENCE



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## CHAPTER I.

### PAULA IS MARRIED.

HAL RUSHTON was very anxious that Mrs Sutton should live with Paula and himself at Deepdale. The old lady was fragile, and he thought it would gratify his future wife to make the last years of her mother's life comfortable. He would have liked to see the unfortunate offspring of Carl Bjornsën put away in an asylum, or under judicious guardianship, and so have removed from his sight and memory for ever all trace of Paula's first marriage. And if he could only forget it, as if it had never

been (he said to himself), he should be so inexplicably happy. But, as Paula had anticipated, Mrs Sutton refused either to live at Highbridge Hall or to give up the charge of her little grandson. She loved the helpless child—that was the first reason, but there was another. The local practitioner of Grassdene, who had known the little imbecile from his birth, and all the circumstances of the case, had persuaded a friend of his—a famous brain doctor, who was taking a holiday at Lynmouth—to see the child and pass an opinion on him, and his verdict had been that Paulie would never be any better, and was very unlikely to live over fourteen or fifteen years of age. So, as long as he lived, his grandmother declared she would never part with him. This settled the question, for much as Hal would have liked his wife to enjoy the society of her mother, the resolution they had arrived at, not to let the public of Deepdale into the secret of Paula's former life, entirely prohibited the presence of the little boy at Highbridge Hall. So he spent the few

weeks before his marriage in a state of feverish anxiety, rushing about after painters and upholsterers, and ready to fly in a temper with everybody, and to declare nothing was being done well enough, nor quickly enough, for the divinity that was coming to bring the sunshine of Heaven upon the old place. Mr and Mrs Measures were both very good to the hot-headed young man in those days—the lady especially so. She it was who restrained his extravagance, and prevented his destroying the calm and mellow tone of the old Hall by the introduction of a lot of modern furniture and pictures that would have killed half its beauty. Hal had never had his taste educated or directed. All he wanted to do was to provide everything that Paula could possibly desire, and he was ready, in consequence, to take any advice that Mr Snoad of Haltham chose to give him. But Mrs Measures was his guardian angel in this particular, and the old rooms bloomed anew in soft, subdued colours under her guiding hand. She took a delight in making the house look

as superior to all other houses in Deepdale as she possibly could. She was secretly overjoyed at the idea of Paula Stafford coming back to queen it over the Gribbles and Axworthys, and the rest of the parishioners, who had hounded her from the village, and she had taken such a dislike to her successor, rosy-cheeked, glossy-haired Miss Brown, that the vicar could hardly persuade her to enter the schoolhouse.

‘A vulgar, presuming, underbred little body, who talks to me as if I were her equal,’ she exclaimed. ‘Who can expect these ignorant children to improve under her auspices? They have lost half that Miss Stafford taught them already. Ah, what short-sighted fools they were to drive that girl away, and how glad I am that Hal Rushton had the wisdom to see what a pearl had been cast amongst swine.’

And, notwithstanding the vicar’s remonstrances, the steadfast hearted little woman made use of the same expression in the very teeth of Mr Gribble.



‘Good-morning, ma’am,’ he said one day as he met her coming out of the schoolroom; ‘you have been to see our dear Miss Brown engaged in her labours of love.’

‘Labours of love! do you call them, Mr Gribble? Is not Miss Brown receiving the usual teacher’s stipend?’ asked Mrs Measures.

‘Surely, ma’am, and well she deserves it, too. Such a pious young woman, affording so excellent an example to our dear little ones. I am sure my good lady and I say that we can never be sufficiently thankful as we found Miss Brown. Quite a godsend in every sense of the word.’

‘Indeed, I fancy I heard you say something of the same kind respecting Miss Stafford when she first came to Deepdale.’

‘Ah! but pardon me, ma’am, *I* knows, and all Deepdale knows, as you take an uncommon interest in that young person—so you’ll pardon me, ma’am, for saying as we was grossly deceived.’

‘I quite agree with you, Mr Gribble,’ retorted

the vicar's wife ; 'you *were* grossly deceived in Miss Stafford, but it was not your fault so much as your ignorance and the ignorance of your friends. Miss Stafford was a great deal too good for the position she held here, and you were unable to appreciate her. She is a lady by birth and breeding, and I rejoice to think she is coming back to hold her proper position amongst us as Mr Rushton's wife. It was misfortune that compelled her to stoop to the office of teacher to the children of Deepdale, and I think it was very brave of her to accept it. But she was a pearl cast before swine, and so anyone who compared her with Miss Brown would say.'

'A *what*, ma'am?' demanded the churchwarden, unable to believe his ears.

'A pearl cast before swine, Mr Gribble,' repeated Mrs Measures, 'and I have told the vicar so several times.'

Mr Gribble did not know what to answer. He was boiling over with rage, and yet he dared not offend the vicar's wife by expressing

his real feelings. So he smiled in a sickly manner, and said,—

‘Well, ma’am, of course we all know as Miss Stafford is a favourite of yours and the vicar’s, and I daresay she made her story good in your eyes. Still, ma’am, when you talk of a *pearl*, ma’am, and *swine*, ma’am, I must say I consider the comparison ’ard.’

‘I can’t help what you think about it, Mr Gribble. It will not change my opinion. Miss Stafford is my friend, and Mrs Hal Rushton will be my friend, and whoever thinks anything but what is good of her will have to keep it to himself or answer to Mr Rushton for it. Good-day,’ and without further comment Mrs Measures passed on.

‘Well, my dear, things *is* come to a pretty pass,’ Mrs Gribble confided to Mrs Axworthy later on, ‘when a clergyman’s wife calls her ’usband’s parishioners *pigs* to their faces. That’s what *we* all are, Mrs Axworthy, ma’am—pigs and swine. And Miss Stafford, who had gentlemen in to supper unbeknown to all, is a

pearl of great price. Why, it's blasphemous, that's what it is, and Mr Gribble says it ought to be reported to the bishop. Swine, indeed! I'd like to know what Mrs Measures is herself, then. Why, she ain't got a dress in her bureau as is worth the value of my Sunday satin. She's a nice person to go talking about *swine*. It makes me sick.'

And here Mrs Rushton 'dropped in' for five minutes' talk, and the story was repeated to her, and soon made the round of every house in the village. But though everyone fumed and spluttered over it, no one dared to resent it, except to one another. They could not afford to make a public example of Mrs Measures' offensive remark. Were they not all tradesmen, and dependent in a great measure on the patronage of the vicarage and the Hall? Had not even the great Mr Gribble an interest in supplying corn and oats to Mr Rushton's stables? So they chewed the cud of bitterness in silence so far as the Hall and vicarage were concerned.

At last August drew to a close—the house was ready for the reception of the bride—and Hal

Rushton packed up his portmanteau and prepared to start for Devon. Mrs Measures was the last person to shake hands with him.

‘Mind you are to bring her straight to us,’ she cried cheerily. ‘I shall expect you both in a fortnight’s time. Tell Paula she must take us as she finds us. There will be no preparation, and no fuss—only a hearty welcome—unless, indeed,’ she added, laughing, ‘Mr Gribble takes it into his head to erect a flowery arch, with an appropriate motto on it.’

‘And Mrs Rushton, senior, stops the carriage to present her with a bouquet,’ said Hal, infected with the idea. ‘No, no, Mrs Measures, we shall look for only one honour, and that will be your welcoming smile. Good-bye.’ And with a touch of his hat, off he flew in his dog-cart, with a radiant face, to catch the train at Haltham.

Paula had objected to being married in Grassdene. Her first wedding had taken place there, and the church was full of unpleasant remembrances. So it had been arranged that they should go over to Lynmouth, with only

Mrs Sutton and the good old doctor, whose name was Gibbon, and after the ceremony and a lunch at the hotel the elders were to return to Grassdene together, and leave the bride and bridegroom to themselves. Hal had pleaded for a quiet honeymoon. He hated the idea of leaving England, and rushing about foreign towns like two strangers—dragging his wife about from one place of amusement to another, and leaving themselves no leisure for quiet talk or mutual acquaintance with each other's minds. Happily, Paula held the same opinions. She loved her promised husband dearly. All she wanted was himself, and the less they mixed with other people the better she should be pleased. So they agreed to spend their short holiday at Lynmouth, where they were equally unknown, and Hal had secured rooms at a quiet hotel close to the lovely wooded slopes of Devon, the land of ferns and rocks and rivulets, and everything that is dreamy, poetical and romantic. Here, for the time being (mamma and the doctor having been carted back to Grassdene), they were

absurdly and ridiculously happy. The weather was glorious, and as soon as their breakfast was completed they would wander forth together, armed with books and shawls and a luncheon basket, and try to lose themselves in the lovely glades by which Lynmouth is surrounded. Then, when Hal had found a particularly enticing little bower, where the leafy branches made a canopy overhead, and the carpet was formed of moss and tiny fern fronds, he would spread out the shawls for Paula to rest upon, and cast himself full length at her feet, with his head upon her lap and his eyes cast upward to her face. And she would open a book and commence to read to him, but there were so many interruptions of a frivolous nature that she would generally lay it aside in despair, and drift into conversation instead. And these conversations proved the first real insight she gained to her lover's soul. Now, with the sweet familiarity of husband and wife, they could talk to each other as they had never talked before, and Hal told her all that was in his mind, and all

that had been there since he had waked up to the knowledge that he had a mind at all. She had known him hitherto as a frank, generous hearted and pleasant spoken man, who was brave and fearless, fond of all field sports and country amusements, and especially fond of herself. But she had had no notion, until she married him, of how much more there was in Hal Rushton than all that. He was no student, and not much of a reader, but he had studied nature deeply, and he had thought upon all sorts of subjects. *She* interested him because she was a little encyclopedia of knowledge, and had a most retentive memory for chapter and verse, and *he* interested her because he seemed to have arrived at so many of the same conclusions as she had entirely by thinking out the subject for himself, without any aid from literature. And so they grew to be great friends—these two—and confidants, which is quite apart from and very much better than being great lovers.

‘I know that I am an awful duffer,’ said



Hal one day, when Paula had expressed her surprise at the accuracy of his scientific knowledge, 'but you see I've got into a habit of thinking out things by myself, as I ride or walk about the country fields and lanes. I've led a very lonely life, you know, darling, hitherto. My father never associated with me. He was an old man when I was born, and I suppose my society bored him. And when that detestable woman took up a position in the house, I saw less of him still. And since his death you may imagine the life I've led with the widow and her son. The only pleasure I had was trying to get out of their presence. So I have grown up very much alone, and been accustomed to puzzle out my ideas by myself, without appealing to the opinion of anyone. I am afraid you will find me a very rough, ignorant sort of fellow, darling (I warned you of that, you may remember, long ago), but you will bear with me, won't you, and teach me better, because I worship the very ground you tread on.'

‘But, Hal, you underrate yourself,’ Paula replied. ‘You must possess a very deep-thinking brain to have arrived at the opinions you hold without the help of anybody. It is easy enough to learn what others have written down for us, but a very different thing to work the problems out for ourselves. I will not let you depreciate your talents any more. I am never tired of hearing you talk. I could listen for hours. You know so much about plants and flowers and animals, and the weather, and all that concerns that sweet, happy nature, the memory of which even seems to have been obliterated from my mind by—’

But Hal put his hand over her mouth.

‘Against orders,’ he cried gaily. ‘We are going to live together, please God, for many years, amidst the sweet, happy nature you admire, and all that you do not know about it I will teach you. Paula, have you ever ridden on horseback?’

‘No, dear, I have never had the opportunity to learn.’

‘I will teach you, darling. What a pleasure it will be to me. For I flatter myself that if I *do* know anything, it is about horses. And my friend Ashfold of Haltham has the prettiest little mare for sale you ever saw, and as quiet as a lamb. I will write to him about her to-morrow.’

‘You mustn’t be extravagant, dear Hal, to procure me luxuries. I can be quite content without riding on horseback.’

‘But I shall never be content till I see you there. Your lovely figure will be shown off to perfection in a habit. Only, you must promise me one thing, Paula.’

‘What is that?’

‘Not to take to hunting.’ She laughed merrily at the idea of flying over hedges and ditches when she had never yet sat in the saddle. ‘Ah, you may laugh, darling, but you don’t know how soon the desire may come to you, nor how infectious it is. But I couldn’t bear it, Paula. It would destroy all my nerve to know you were in the field. I should give up following

the hounds myself. I should be so terribly anxious.'

'Dear boy, don't excite yourself about it. I expect I shall have enough to do looking after that big house without thinking of hunting, neither have I any desire that way. But if the idea makes you nervous, I will promise you never to do it.'

'Thank you, dear. It is a great relief to my mind. I don't think that without it I could ever have taught you to ride. I have seen such horrible accidents occur in the field—and to think of one's wife, one's own flesh and blood, being mangled or killed in that manner—' He shut his eyes for a moment, as though to shut out the sight, and then continued: 'There is a girl, Amy Willard, whom I have known from childhood. She is the daughter of a neighbouring farmer, and is a splendid horsewoman—indeed, she was put in the saddle almost as soon as she could sit there by herself—and she attends all the meets. Well, do you know, she has spoiled many a good day's hunt-

ing for me, for when the run is unusually hard, or the ground is broken up, I cannot get her out of my head, and am always wondering if she has come to grief, or not. Women are at such a terrible disadvantage in the hunting field.'

'Well, I will never spoil your pleasure in that way, Hal, for I know how much you enjoy it.'

Oh, I like a run, now and then, as well as the best of them, but I expect I sha'n't hunt as regularly this season as I have been used to do.'

'Yes, you must. It will vex me if you give up any of your usual habits for my sake. Besides, I am proud of your prowess in the hunting field, and last autumn I used to think you looked so handsome in your pink coat and top-boots, as you rode home past the school-house window.'

'Little flatterer! I shall want you to drive out in your pony chaise sometimes and see the hounds throw off. It is such a pretty sight.

You will have to learn to drive as well as ride Paula. Did I tell you that I had sold the phaeton and bought a low basket-carriage instead, with a nice little black pony, for you to jog along the country lanes in? And your great lumbering husband will jog with you sometimes, sweetheart, if you will let him.'

'Oh, Hal, you are too good to me. Driving about in my own carriage! Why, I sha'n't know myself. And that dear old garden, too, at which I sometimes peeped through the drive gates, I look forward so to wandering about it. I shall feel as if I were in a dream when I find myself settled down for ever at Highbridge Hall.'

'You don't know half the treasures I have to show you yet, Paula. I hope you like dogs, my dear?'

'Very much. I had a little terrier once, long, long ago, that I loved like a child. It had grown up with me from a puppy. It was my little friend.'

‘And what became of it?’

Paula flushed.

‘You had better not ask me,’ she replied in a low voice.

‘That brute wouldn’t let you keep it?’ said Hal interrogatively.

‘Worse than that. He nearly kicked it to death because—because—it came on the quarter-deck after me, and then he flung it into the sea. I can’t think of it even now, Hal,’ said Paula in a faltering voice, ‘I loved the poor little thing so.’

‘I wonder the fellows on board ship didn’t lynch that man twenty times over. However, let’s hope he’s got it hot now,’ replied Hal fiercely. ‘But don’t cry, my angel. I know one dog can’t make up for the loss of another, but you shall keep as many as you like at the Hall. You have seen some of my golden setters. I am considered rather famous for them in the county, and sell a couple of dozen puppies sometimes in the year. I am sure you must love puppies?’

‘Oh, yes, and kittens and chickens, and everything that is young,’ she replied eagerly, and then, checking herself, she continued slowly: ‘Isn’t it sad, Hal, that loving them all as I do I should feel it so difficult to love my own child? I don’t care for him half so much as mother does. Poor little fellow! He repels me sometimes, and seems to be an epitome of all my miserable past.’

‘Dearest, I can quite understand the feeling. It is one of the unhappinesses I mean to strive to make you forget. It would have been better if God had seen fit to take the poor little chap. But as He hasn’t, I am glad your mother is so fond of him. But don’t dwell on the subject, Paula. Your best comfort lies in the fact that the child is unconscious of his loss. *He* is happy enough, there is no doubt of that.’

‘Oh, yes, and this is the last time in my life in which to worry myself unnecessarily. For you have made me so happy, love. I cannot recognise in myself the wretched, despondent



girl who used to toil to put something like sense into the brains of those awful children at Deepdale. And now to go back to the very same place as *your wife*—*I*, whom Mr Gribble used to think he highly honoured by giving a seat in his gig to Haltham. Oh, it does make me laugh so to think of it, dear, all the time I am ready to weep with gratitude for your having changed my prison to a paradise.'

'And what have you done for me, Paula? Made me know happiness for the first time in my life. I can conceive in all the world no greater bliss than this. To be alone with the woman I love best—with my own wife—and to know that neither of us has a thought that is not shared by the other. You have seen that I am a jealous man, dear. That is true, though I do not anticipate that you will ever make me jealous of any other man in the future.'

'Oh! never, *never*, Hal.'

'But if anything *could* rouse my jealous feelings again, it would be to know that you had

any greater *friend* than myself, that there was anyone in the wide world who shared a thought you would not confide to me. That conviction would make me so hopeless, in thinking that though I held your body I had no power to enchain your mind. One soul, one body. That is my idea of a true marriage. And though your body were to decay, I could still be happy, knowing I held the key to your soul. But your body, however fresh and beautiful, would be worthless to me without the other and dearer claim. I don't know if I make myself plain to you. I tumble all my stupid thoughts out at your feet. But that is the delight of having a friend, that one need never be at the trouble of appearing at one's best.'

'But you are always at your best to me, Hal, and I agree with every word you say. And you need never be afraid I shall have a closer friend or confidant than yourself. Indeed, with the exception of dear kind Mrs Measures, I do not expect to have many friends in Deepdale. I wonder what attitude your stepmother will

assume towards me. She cannot feel very cordially disposed, since my advent ousts her from the Hall.'

'I won't answer for what she *feels*, but I am quite sure she will not display any open hostility towards you. I am rather afraid of having too much of the other thing. But pray don't encourage her, Paula. Place her visits to the Hall at once on a formal footing, and don't let her get too familiar with you. If you do, she will try to re-establish herself as one of the family. And I have had more than enough of her, darling. She is a vulgar, illiterate woman, not fit to be your companion, and though my father unfortunately gave her our name, I will never own her as a relation. She has her own house now, and let her stay in it. I will have the Hall no longer polluted by her presence.'

'It will be rather difficult, I am afraid, to keep her out of it, when it has been her home for so many years,' said Paula dubiously.

'It will require tact, but I am determined it

shall be done,' replied her husband. 'If we don't make a stand against it, we shall have that woman and her son sitting down with us at every meal, and offering to share our drives and walks. No, no; I have married you for myself, and I mean to keep you to myself. I will not have you herding with Mrs Rushton and Mrs Gribble and Mrs Axworthy, and others like them. There are one or two ladies in Deepdale besides Mrs Measures, and a few more in Haltham, and if they don't care to know us, we'll do without any society but our own; for I am determined you shall never be pulled down to the level of the envious, back-biting crew who drove you out of your appointment.'

'Oh, Hal,' sighed Paula, 'sometimes I think, suppose I should bring you into an atmosphere of strife and disunion, instead of peace and happiness?'

'Strife and disunion!' he echoed, laughing, 'how should they hurt us so long as there is love and unity in our own hearts? But I have

plucked my White Rose, and I will not have her dragged down again to the dirty level of these people. You were placed on it by the appointment you held amongst them, but you have risen above it to your proper position, and you shall not descend again, unless it be through condescension. But they will not easily forgive you for having frustrated their designs, and the less you have to say to them at all the better. But come, my darling, the dew is beginning to fall. We had better stroll back to dinner. I must not risk your taking cold, even for such a lovely time as this.'

After a fortnight spent much in the same manner, the lovers began to think of turning their steps homeward in right earnest. For though they dearly loved each other, they were both sensible that life held too many serious duties to permit of such a time of idle dalliance lasting for ever, or even being satisfactory for very long. Hal began to think of his stables more often than he had done, and to wonder if his head-groom Derrick was doing his duty by the horses, and

checking the corn-chandler's account regularly. And Paula was secretly longing to view her new possessions and mount authority over the domestic arrangements at the Hall—to enter, in fact, upon the little kingdom of which Hal had made her queen.

‘Such a notable housekeeper as you are, who can make tea as beautifully as you did for me once or twice in the schoolhouse,’ he said, laughing, ‘will be delighted with the stores of linen and china and glass at the Hall. Not that I know much about it myself, but Mrs Measures assured me they were quite *unique*. But I am not going to have you turn yourself into a drudge, my Paula, mind that. You may superintend your maids as much as you like, but they must do the work for you, or they must go. I want you to sing and play, and read and ride, and enjoy your life to the utmost. You have had enough hardship already, poor child, God knows. The future shall be as bright and pleasant as I can make it for you.’

Paula could not answer him. A big ball rose

in her throat to prevent it. But she squeezed his arm tight, and a prayer went up from her very heart to God to make her grateful for all His benefits.

## CHAPTER II.

### A TRIUMHPANT RETURN.

AMONGST Mrs Measures' most intimate friends was Lady Bristowe. She did not live in Deepdale, but at a big place called Tor Abbey, some miles distant, and as she was the widow of Admiral Sir Thomas Bristowe, and had a large income, the country people considered her to be a very grand lady indeed. In reality she was a very uninteresting personage. Her fat, soft, foolish face, with its triple chins, was always good-natured and smiling, but her intellect was at the lowest ebb, and she was ready to be swayed by every contrary wind of doctrine, and to believe all that was told to her. Had it not been, indeed, for the sagacity of her companion, Miss Sarah Brennan, Lady Bristowe would have been oftener taken in than she



was. Miss Brennan was a sharp, keen woman, between thirty and forty years of age, with a suspicious nature, an evil tongue, and a propensity for the society of the lower classes. She was half a lady's maid and half a companion, of sufficient unimportance to be thrust in the background whenever it was convenient for her employer to do so, and yet considered good enough to sit with Lady Bristowe, and take her meals at table, whenever there was no one better to be procured. For, with all her riches, her ladyship was a lonely woman, and wanted an object in life. She had but one child—a son, who was in the Royal Navy, and generally away at sea—and she soon tired of her country amusements, her poultry yard and flower garden and pet spaniels, when she had no one but Miss Sarah Brennan to talk to about them. It was this reason that had made her take to driving over to see Mrs Measures much oftener than was convenient to that busy little woman. She would be just looking over the vicar's linen, perhaps—or making a cake

for Sunday, or superintending the pickling of gherkins, or the boiling of raspberry jam—when up the vicarage drive would come rolling the open barouche of Lady Bristowe, with its grand bay horses and its pompous men-servants, and her ladyship's portly figure occupying all the front seat, while Sarah Brennan sat at the back, with a couple of Blenheim spaniels. But Mrs Measures had never had the heart to repulse her ladyship's friendship. She was too good-natured to do so, and Lady Bristowe was too good-natured for anyone to be angry with. She beamed with good-nature. She pressed her benefits on those she liked, until it became impossible to refuse them. And her fat, foolish face would shake with laughter over the silliest story or the feeblest joke, whilst her companion sat opposite, with hard, stony eyes and tightly compressed lips, the very model of a dangerous and unsympathetic woman. Naturally Mrs Measures soon confided the history of Hal Rushton's love and marriage to Lady Bristowe. She had called one day when the vicar's wife

was on the point of going over to Highbridge Hall, and she had told her all about it. Not *quite* all, perhaps, for she omitted two of the leading incidents, one being Paula Stafford's quarrel with the churchwardens, the other that Hal's father's widow was such a low and uneducated person. Mrs Measures considered herself justified in withholding these facts, since she did not see the use of repeating them, nor what business they were of anyone but the parties concerned. So Lady Bristowe was left to imagine that the pretty school teacher had relinquished her situation on purpose to marry the handsome young farmer, and she thought it a most romantic story. Indeed, she became quite enthusiastic about it, and all the more so because Paula had turned out to be the daughter of a naval officer. The Royal Navy was Lady Bristowe's 'fetish.' Her father and her brothers had all been sailors. She had married a sailor, and her only child was a sailor, so that to pick up anything that had belonged to the navy in Deepdale seemed like treasure-trove in her eyes. She became

quite anxious for the return of the bride and bridegroom, that she might become personally acquainted with young Mrs Rushton, and bestow some of her favours upon her.

‘I have so few friends, you know, dear Mrs Measures,’ she said. ‘There is positively no one fit to associate with about here except yourself and Miss Levenson of Pryde and Lord and Lady Warden at Cheath Hall. It will be a real pleasure if this young lady will visit me occasionally at Tor Abbey. Oh, not just yet, of course,’ she continued, smiling broadly; ‘we must give them time to grow a little tired of each other’s company. *We* know what it is at first, don’t we, Mrs Measures? You haven’t forgotten, I daresay, any more than myself, all the billing and cooing, and the dears and the darlings. The men are all alike, my dear.’ But it wears off very soon, that’s the funny part of it,’ and Lady Bristowe chuckled over the idea until her face was crimson.

‘It is lucky it *does* wear off,’ replied the vicar’s wife, ‘or it would sadly interfere with the

business of life. I wonder how the house or the servants or the babies would get on if marriage were one long honeymoon.'

'Talking of houses,' said Lady Bristowe, 'I should like to see over Highbridge Hall next time you go there, if you don't think the young people would consider it an impertinence.'

'I am *sure* they would not,' replied Mrs Measures warmly. 'They ought to be flattered by the interest you take in it. The workmen have not quite finished there yet, and I go over every afternoon to see how they are getting on, for we expect Mr and Mrs Rushton home the second week in September.'

'They come to the vicarage first, do they not?'

'Yes, for a week. I thought I could help Paula to put the finishing touches to her house better if she were staying here instead of at Highbridge Hall.'

'I shall come over and make their acquaintance whilst they are with you,' said Lady Bristowe.

‘They will be pleased, I am sure,’ responded her friend, ‘and I am equally certain you will be pleased with them. I can assure you I look upon them as quite my best friends in Deepdale.’

This conversation led to a visit to Highbridge Hall, where good-natured Lady Bristowe discovered that the little greenhouse was rather scantily furnished, and insisted upon filling it with exotics from her magnificent glasshouses at Tor Abbey.

‘We mustn’t let the bride come home and find anything wanting,’ she said. ‘Now, really, my dear, you must let me have my way in this little matter. You know we have dozens of plants more than we can use; indeed, my gardener, Bennett, makes an income out of selling my seedlings. I shall order him to stock this little house for the winter.’

‘I am sure Paula will deeply appreciate your kindness, Lady Bristowe. I believe the child loves flowers above everything else, but Mr Rushton has not turned his attention hitherto

to ornamental gardening. He is fonder of his stables. However, Paula will keep him up to it now.'

A few days after Mrs Measures mentioned that the day for their return was fixed upon, and she intended to meet them at the Haltham station and bring them home.

'What *in*, my dear?' inquired her ladyship.

Mrs Measures laughed a little, and said,—

'Well, I mean to drive into Haltham in our own chaise, but as it only holds two, I shall leave the man to bring it home, and hire an open fly from Moore, which will carry us all three, and the luggage into the bargain.'

'Nonsense, my dear Mrs Measures; you will do no such thing. You will take my carriage. Fancy bringing a bride and bridegroom home in a musty old fly. I won't hear of it. They must have the barouche, and are as welcome to it as the flowers in May.'

'But, my dear Lady Bristowe, this is going too far. The Rushtons have no such claim on you. They are quite simple young people, you

must remember, and I am afraid it would seem like putting them under too deep an obligation.'

'What, my lending my carriage to *you*. No, no, you don't get out of it that way. It is at your disposal on the tenth, and will be at the vicarage in time to meet the four o'clock train at Haltham.'

'You are so kind, I don't know how to refuse you,' murmured Mrs Measures, who yet saw the advantage to her young friends of such an acquaintance, 'but it seems too bad to deprive you of your carriage this fine weather for even an afternoon. What will you do without it, Lady Bristowe?'

'Well, I was going to propose that, as there are four seats in the barouche, I would drive into Haltham with you, that is to say if I should not be in the way.'

'*In the way!* in your own carriage. How can you suggest such a thing?' replied the vicar's wife reproachfully; 'indeed you are altogether too good, and I am sure Hal and Paula will say



the same. This will make their home coming quite a triumphal return.'

And in her heart Mrs Measures was secretly delighted at the idea of the envy and surprise which would be excited in the breasts of Paula's enemies by the open interest displayed in her by the lady of Tor Abbey. Of course everybody in Deepdale knew that she was expected to return home with her husband on the tenth of September, and many were the speculations as to whether she would feel her position so acutely as to hide her confusion in a close fly, or whether she would be brazen enough to drive through the village in an open one. Mrs Gribble, whose 'viller' was situated some way past the vicarage, took the trouble to walk down to Mrs Axworthy's cottage, which stood on the way to Haltham, in order to watch from her front window for the Rushtons' return, and Mrs Axworthy sent her son Jemmy some little distance up the road in order that he might run back and let them know as soon as ever the fly came in sight. Mrs Measures,

the better to baulk their curiosity, and render the *dénoûement* the more striking, had herself driven over to the Abbey that morning and persuaded her friend to go to Haltham by another route, so that the residents in Deepdale were quite ignorant that she had started to meet the newly married couple.

‘I suppose,’ said Mrs Gribble to Mrs Axworthy, ‘that the vicar’s wife is a-fussing and a-fuming in the kitchen because her dear Miss Stafford is coming ’ome. Redikerlous! Mrs Poland says she sent in two ducks and an ’am there yesterday morning. Mutton and beef ain’t good enough, I suppose, for such as she. She may be thankful if she finds meat in her mouth to her life’s end, for notwithstanding all the fuss they’re a-making about her, she ain’t no good, Mrs Axworthy, and that they’ll find out to their cost before many years is over their ’eads. I pities that pore young man from the bottom of my ’eart. He ain’t been all he should have been, perhaps, to his stepma, but he’s deserving of a better lot than this anyway.’

‘So *I* sez,’ responded Mrs Axworthy, ‘but Mr Haxworthy, *he* say that they’re much of a muchness. Young Hal Rushton was always stuck-up and himperent to his helders, and that’s a bad sign in a young man. Shall you have a good view of them from where you hare, Mrs Gribble, or shall we go hupstairs?’

‘Oh, no, thank you, I can see beautiful,’ replied Mrs Gribble, who was ensconced behind a lace window curtain; ‘not that I cares much how the minx looks, or don’t look, for never does she darken my doors, after the insult she paid Mr Gribble, and she needn’t think it. I daresay she thinks, now she’s a-coming ‘ome as Mrs Rushton, and the ‘All’s been fresh done up for ‘er, that the ladies of Deepdale will forget all that’s gone before, and be ready to congratulate ‘er upon ‘er marriage. But not *me*, Mrs Axworthy. I ain’t made of sich stuff. I’ve got a very true ‘eart, and a very feeling one, but I can’t forget a hinsult, nor yet a hinjury, nor I don’t consider as Mrs Rushton is a proper person for any of us ladies to pass the time of day to.’

‘Well,’ said her friend contemplatively, ‘me and Haxworthy have had many a talk over it, and he says as how we stand in a difficult position with regard to the vicarage. There is no doubt that, right or wrong, Mr and Mrs Measures *have* took up Miss Stafford (or Mrs Rushton, as I should say), and he don’t want to lose the churchwardenship, nor have any misunderstanding with the vicar. And he says that no doubt ’Al Rushton will be giving parties on ’is return, in order to make things straight for his wife, and he thinks it will be the dooty of us ladies to visit’ ’er, cool-like if you choose, but still to go to the ’All, and keep in with the vicarage for our gentlemen’s sakes.’

‘Ah, well, if they gives pleasant parties, dances and garden “feets,” and suchlike, I don’t know as I mightn’t try to overlook the past,’ replied Mrs Gribble affably, ‘but I can never like ’er, Mrs Axworthy—*never!*’

‘Ma, ma!’ cried Jemmy, tearing into the room, breathless and dusty, ‘the carriage is

a-coming over the 'ill now, and it's got two 'orses and two coachmen.'

'Two 'orses, Jem!' echoed his mother. 'It can't never be the Rushtons, then. It must be Lady Bristowe or Lady Warden driving through Deepdale. Why, there ain't a two-'orse fly in all Haltham!'

'It's Lady Bristowe's barouche; I can see the green liveries,' said Mrs Gribble, as she gazed through the curtain, with Mrs Axworthy leaning over her shoulder.

The open carriage drew nearer. It was going at a rapid rate, and the horses' coats were slightly flecked with foam. In it were seated four people. On the front seat, Lady Bristowe, with the bride by her side, and on the back, Hal and Mrs Measures; and all three ladies held enormous bouquets of flowers, Paula's being made entirely of white blossoms. They all looked very happy, and were talking and laughing together; but they passed the window like a flash of lightning, and left nothing but a cloud of dust behind them. Mrs Gribble

and Mrs Axworthy looked at one another with undissembled surprise.

‘Well, I *never*!’ cried the latter, as soon as she found her tongue, ‘if it wasn’t them, after all, and in Lady Bristowe’s carriage, sitting there as ’igh and mighty as you choose, and as if it all belonged to them. And did you see her ’at, Mrs Gribble, ma’am, with a white feather curled round it, and a fawn Newmarket coat? What next? Well, wonders will never cease! And how did her ladyship come to know ’em as intimate as all that? That’s some of Mrs Measures’ doings, I’ll be bound. Lady Bristowe is always at the vicarage; but to visit a parson’s wife is a different thing. Well, if I hadn’t seen it with my own heyes, I wouldn’t never have believed it.’

‘Nor me neither,’ rejoined the other lady. “‘It’s the ungodly flourishing like a green bay tree,” as the scripture says, and I feel as if some ’orrible dispensation must be ’anging over Deepdale when sich injustices is allowed. Miss Stafford riding in her ladyship’s barouche, when

she ain't never so much as taken any notice of *me*, as everyone knows for miles around to be the churchwarden's lawful wife. Well, I must go 'ome and tell Mr Gribble this, for he'd never believe it from any lips but mine.'

Meanwhile, Hal and Paula had been anything but elated by the honour so unexpectedly paid to them. They would much rather have driven home quietly by themselves, or in the company of Mrs Measures. To see her kind face on the platform of Haltham station had been a real pleasure. Hal Rushton had wrung her hand, exclaiming, 'This *is* a surprise! How very good of you. Paula will be as delighted as myself,' and turned to communicate the news to his wife, as she alighted from the carriage. But when Mrs Measures had replied, 'I am not alone. My friend Lady Bristowe, who is anxious to make your acquaintance, has driven me over in her barouche, and intends to take us all back to the vicarage,' the young people, though rather overwhelmed, were obliged to consent. And Lady Bristowe had been so

effusive in her welcome, too. She had shaken Hal's hand as if she had known him all his life, and insisted upon kissing the pretty, pathetic-looking bride. So the luggage was dispatched in Moore's fly, and the party returned in triumph, as we have seen, to Deepdale. The bouquets had been rather a trial to Hal. Like most men, he abhorred anything like publicity or display, but the flowers were there, and Lady Bristowe would take no denial. And as a palliative to being carried through the village as if they were going to the races or the hustings, there was the undoubted fact that her ladyship had paid his young wife a great compliment, and that the acquaintance might be of service to her. Mrs Gribble and Mrs Axworthy were not the only people in Deepdale who saw and commented on this unexpected return. Every window in the village held a face or two, full of disappointment and surprise. Deepdale had intended to be condescending to Mr and Mrs Hal Rushton if it found it worth its while to be so, but in the



face of Lady Bristowe's patronage it began to fear that its condescension might be overlooked. Her ladyship would not enter the vicarage, for Paula seemed tired, although her face was flushed, and she said she ought to take a rest. But she did not part from her without finding out the Christian name of her late father, that she might look him up in the *Navy List* as soon as she got home, and she assured the young couple that she should be one of the first to welcome them when they took possession of their own house, and she hoped very soon to see them both at Tor Abbey. And then she enfolded Paula once more in her ample embrace, and thrusting all the bouquets in her hands, she drove smiling away.

‘The most good-natured woman in the world,’ said Mrs Measures, as she led the way into the cool vicarage parlour, ‘and one whom I hope will be a good friend to you, Paula. She is very rich, and has no near relations on which to bestow her benefits, and she has taken such a fancy to you because your father was in the

navy. You must take everything she chooses to give you, my dear, and be very sweet to her in return, for she knows all the county families, and is really a person of importance.'

'I am sure we are very much obliged for her kindness,' replied Hal; 'but I'm afraid the county families will be a cut above us, Mrs Measures.'

'I don't know why they should be. A man can be no more than a gentleman, and now that you have got rid of that objectionable widow, there is no obstacle to your receiving anybody in your house. But let me show Paula to her room, that she may take off her things.'

When they descended to the parlour again a substantial meal was spread upon the table, and the vicar was present. He saluted them kindly, but rather gravely, at least Paula imagined he was more cordial with Hal than with herself. He called the former 'dear boy,' and shook him warmly by the hand, but to her he only expressed a wish that her married life might be long and happy. Afterwards, on thinking it

over, she blamed herself for blaming him. It was foolish of her to have forgotten that he had known her husband from a child, and she was a comparative stranger to him. Still, something in the tone of his voice had reminded her of the day that she had been catechised by him in that same room, in the presence of his churchwardens, and told her that he had not forgotten it either. This feeling, added to her fatigue, made Paula unusually quiet during the evening meal, and Mrs Measures remarked that her gay spirits had suddenly flagged.

‘It is the fatigue of the long railway journey,’ said Hal, looking fondly at her. ‘She is not a very strong little body, Mrs Measures, and we must pack her off to bed early to-night, in order that she may recover herself.’

Something had certainly occurred to depress Paula’s spirits, for when the meal was concluded, and she crept into the vicarage garden after her husband, she was as white as a lily.

‘My darling,’ he exclaimed, as he kissed the slight hand she thrust within his arm, ‘to-day

has been too much for you. My White Rose looks quite drooping. Won't you be good, and go to bed, whilst I run over to the Hall and have a look at the dogs and horses?'

'Oh, no, Hal,' she answered earnestly, clinging to him. 'Please let me go with you. I am not too tired—indeed, I am not—and I should so love to see *our* house, love, and *our* garden.'

'But, Paula, it is nearly a mile from this.'

'It will do me good to walk. I have been sitting all day. Can't you see that it is the heat, dear, that makes me look so pale? A little walk in the cool evening air will do me all the good in the world.'

'All right, then. Get your hat, and we'll be off. I'll tell Mrs Measures where we are going.'

In another minute they were pacing together the quiet country fields that lay between the vicarage and the Hall.

'Do you know,' said Paula, when they were out of human earshot, 'why I longed to come with you this evening, Hal? It was just in

order to find myself alone with you again, like we were at Lynmouth. To-day, with all its bustle and publicity and congratulation, we have seemed to be wider apart than we were yesterday. It is all kindness, I know, but it comes between us, and I want you—*you only.*'

'You silly girl,' said Hal, venturing to kiss the white face upturned to his, 'shall we not be always together for the rest of our lives? Why, you'll be sick of me before long, Paula, after the fashion of modern wives, and looking out for someone else to admire you and say pretty things to you.'

'Never, never, Hal! Don't speak like that. You pain me.'

'Well, then, I won't, until it happens. But I agree with you, darling. We are never so happy as when we are alone. For my own part, I would rather have gone straight home to the Hall, even if it were not quite ready for us, but Mrs Measures' offer was so kind, and so evidently came from her heart, that I did not think it possible to refuse it.'

‘Oh, no! And don’t think I am ungrateful to such a kind friend as she is to us. Only, our *own* home! It will be so delightful to find ourselves there, won’t it, Hall?’

‘It will be the heaven I have dreamt of, Paula,’ he replied.

‘This is the extent to which I have yet gone,’ said Paula, as they reached the gates of the Hall, and caught a glimpse through them of the lawn and flower garden, which were approached by a handsome drive bordered by rhododendron and other flowering shrubs. ‘You don’t know, Hal, how often the poor school teacher walked this way in the evenings, and peered through those gates, and wondered if her handsome friend were anywhere about, or if he guessed how she regarded him.’

‘Don’t allude to those hateful days, my Paula; never think of them again,’ cried Hal, as he swung open the wide gates for her to pass through. ‘You are in your own domains now, darling, “Monarch of all you survey,”

and God bless you for consenting to queen it over them and me.'

He raised his hat as he spoke, and Paula thought a wife had never had a more chivalrous welcome to her new home. The house and grounds were naturally looking their best, and she was enchanted with everything she saw. She had not thought it would be half so beautiful, nor that Hal's head and heart would have been filled with so much care for her. Soft tears hung trembling on her eyelashes as she realised her happiness, and she could find no words in which to express her feelings. She could only cling close to her husband's arm, and whisper her love to him, as he pointed out the alterations he had made and the improvements he had effected in the different departments. His stables were his great pride, and he was not satisfied till Paula had inspected his two tall hunters, the mare he drove in his dog-cart, and the little pony for her basket-carriage.

'We only want a riding horse for the mistress,

Derrick, and then I think we shall be complete,' he said to the groom. 'By-the-way, has Mr Ashfold sent over any message about his chestnut filly? I wrote to him about it from Lynmouth.'

'Mr Ashfold was over here last week, sir,' replied Derrick, touching his forelock, 'and the little mare ain't quite herself — got cold or summat—or he would have sent her over for the lady to try. But he expected she would be all right by now.'

'Well, I must write again and ask after her. Where's Joe?'

'He's out somewhere with the dogs, sir. I don't let him go till I've brought the horses in from exercise. He'll be back before long.'

'Are the dogs all right?'

'Yes, sir. "Queenie" whelped down a litter of five the day before yesterday, but she's locked up in the outhouse, and Joe's took the key.'

'Well, they ought to be AI, if they live. Come, dear, I won't let you stand about any



longer. We will walk over and see the dogs to-morrow. Why, it is past eight. Mrs Measures will be expecting us home.'

'One more turn round the garden, Hal,' pleaded Paula, 'it is so lovely. I think I shall sit out here all day. What is that grand dark tree whose branches sweep the ground?'

'A cedar, dear. It is grand, as you say, but it destroys the grass underneath it. I prefer the mulberry and walnut trees. I can't tell you how many hundred years old this mulberry tree is. It has stood here for generations. And it has a fine promise of fruit on it, too. Do you like mulberries?'

'Oh, I *love* them!' cried Paula childishly. 'I shall have black teeth all day long as soon as they are ripe.'

'Greedy girl. We will carry out an arm-chair to the kitchen garden, and there you shall sit and gorge, till we have to carry you back in it. By-the-way, you haven't seen the fruit and vegetable garden yet. It is close by—behind that wall. Come and be introduced to old

Potter, the gardener. Old Potterer, as I call him ; but he's a good old servant, and will adore you.'

He pulled her playfully away from the lawn as he spoke, and opened a door in the stone wall that enclosed the fruit garden. The evening was still light, and every object discernible, although the green leaves had assumed a greyer tint in the fading day.

'I expect Potter has gone home. I think he generally strikes work at seven. I have some splendid peach trees here, Paula. I wish we could find a basket. We would take some peaches to Mrs Measures. They must be in perfection now.'

'There is someone moving at the bottom of the garden, Hal,' said Paula, 'don't you see, close to the wall.'

'By Jove! yes. It's Potter picking the fruit. I told him to let the cook preserve what ripened during our absence. Let us go and stop his depredations.'

They ran down the walk together hand in hand like two children, and startled the figure

next the wall, which turned out to be not the gardener but the widowed Mrs Rushton, with a market-basket on her arm, which she was busily filling with fruit. Hal perceived the situation at a glance, and his face darkened.

‘Mrs Rushton,’ he exclaimed, ‘what on earth are you doing here?’

The widow’s freckled and unwholesome looking face appeared quite ghastly in the half light, as she turned it towards them and stepped quickly off the garden bed.

‘Oh, ’Al!’ she replied, ‘is that you? I ’eard you was expected to-day at the vicarage, but I didn’t think to meet you ’ere.’

‘I suppose not; but I conclude you see I have my wife with me?’ replied Hal haughtily.

‘To be sure, and I ’ope I sees you well, ma’am,’ said the widow, as she thrust forth a horny hand for Paula to shake. ‘I’ve been quite busy picking up the peaches. There’s such a many on ’em, and they do lie and rot so, it seems a pity. But we was always

famous for our fruit at the 'All, wasn't we, 'Al?'

'Yes. But I see no necessity for *your* picking them up, Mrs Rushton. Our servants are surely capable of doing that, and I gave Potter my orders respecting the wall fruit before I left. Did you consult him about it?'

'Consult Mr Potter?' cried the widow, tossing her head, 'why, certainly *not*. It would be a strange thing, I think, if *I*, who 'as lived in this 'ouse as my own for ten year, should demean myself to consult a gardener before I picks up a few peaches.'

'But why give yourself the trouble?' continued Hal, taking the basket, which was full to the brim with the choicest fruit, from her hand. 'It is very good of you, of course, but there is no need. However, as it happens, you have saved Mrs Rushton and myself the task of picking them, as we were just about to do, for Mrs Measures. Is this *your* basket?'

'No, I suppose not. Nothink seems mine nowadays. I took it from the tool 'ouse.

Times is wonderful changed, ma'am,' she continued, to Paula, 'but it's Time only as will show if it's for the better. Pride 'as its fall, as well as misfortin', and it's only dooty as brings a blessing. But I wish you 'ealth and 'appiness, ma'am, for to enjoy what you've got. Good-evening.'

And with that Mrs Rushton swept up the garden path and disappeared.

'Oh, Hal, you have mortally offended her,' said Paula.

'I don't care if I have. She sha'n't steal our peaches, if I can help it. I suppose she's been filling her basket every day during our absence. I will have the key of the fruit garden brought into the house for the future, and give Potter strict orders to admit no one but ourselves. By Jove! this basket is heavy. She must have got about twenty pounds in it. But it's her last attempt at thieving. I'll take care of that.'

'How vicious she looked, Hal. There was quite a lurid light in her green eyes whilst

she was pretending to wish me well. I am sure she hates me for having usurped her place at the Hall.'

'No, Paula, not *her* place. She has had no right here since my father's death. But I dare say she bears you no goodwill, for she is a malicious, evil-natured person.'

'She is horrible,' acquiesced Paula, 'and I wish we had not met her here on the first occasion of our seeing our dear home together. It seems like an evil omen—as if she were a malignant fairy who had the power to blight our happiness if we offended her.'

'Now, my darling, you're getting silly, which proves you are over-tired. How lucky I thought of telling Derrick to pop "Tubby" into the pony chaise. Jump in, and I'll put the widow's spoils at your feet. That's it! Now, the reins, Derrick. I am just going to show the mistress what her new pony is made of, and as soon as I have dropped her at the vicarage I'll bring him back again.'

And as 'Tubby' trotted at a good pace

through the flower-scented lanes, and Hal's loving words were poured into her ears, Paula forgot her passing dismay at Widow Rushton's greeting, and thought only of the great happiness before her.

### CHAPTER III.

#### PAULA'S VISITORS.

THE incident of the 'rape of the peaches,' though considered an excellent joke at the vicarage, was looked upon in a totally different light by the inhabitants of Wavertree Cottage. Mrs Rushton returned home, fuming over the insult she declared she had received, to relate the story to her son Edward Snaley, who was idling the evening away by lolling over the window sill in his shirt sleeves, and smoking a black briar-root pipe. As the widow finished her abuse of her stepson's behaviour, he withdrew from the window and took a seat by the table, leaning his elbows upon it.

Ted Snaley has not figured prominently in



these pages yet, but he was by no means an unimportant tool in his mother's hands, and more than ready to further any scheme of revenge which she might be inclined to carry out. He hated his stepbrother Hal Rushton. The dislike had commenced long before their parents had become united, when Ted was a malicious lad, given to torturing animals and oppressing smaller children, and Hal had given him one or two thrashings for his cruelty. When his mother married old Farmer Rushton, she had made Ted believe that he would inherit half (if not all) the property at her own death, and he had never forgiven Hal for stepping in (as he termed it) between his prospects and himself. He had always hated him, and done everything he could think of to annoy him, even whilst he was being entertained under his roof, and now that he had been turned out of the Hall, he hated him still more. His green, white-lashed eyes gleamed with an evil fire as he leaned forward on the table and confronted the widow.

‘Mother,’ he said, ‘I want to have a serious talk with you about this. We must have no more fooling about it. Are we going to keep in with the ’All, or are we not? We must decide that there question afore I says another word.’

‘Lor’, Ted, how you do talk, to be sure! In course we must keep in with ’em, drat ’em both. But how are we to live here comfortable else? *You* won’t work in this gardin, you know. You’re a deal too lazy, and a ’undred a year won’t go far towards keeping the ’ouse up. You’ve bin brought up like a gentleman since I married old Rushton, and you won’t like to miss your luxuries. But I don’t know where you’ll get ’em, unless it’s in pickin’s from the ’All.’

‘*Pickin’s from the ’All*,’ repeated Snaley witheringly. ‘Yes, and I means to ’ave pickin’s from the ’All, but not the sort as you want. Wot’s the good of getting ’Al’s back up for the sake of a few paltry peaches? How’ll that ’elp us? No, what I means is this—are we game for a big thing, or are we not? ’Cos if we are, we

must go on a new tack, and be very partikeler they don't see our 'and.'

'Lor', Ted,' cried the widow, closing the window and drawing her chair close to his, 'you're a sharp 'un, I know, but whatever would you be at?'

'Mother,' said Snaley in a low voice, 'you're a good nuss, I know, when you chooses, but don't you think as the old man might have lasted a little longer if you 'adn't been there?'

He fixed his piercing little eyes upon her with so elfish a look as he spoke that the widow's pale face grew yellow beneath his scrutiny.

'Bless me, lad, no! What a hidea! And of your own mother, too. Lor', Ted, you can't think what you're a-saying of.'

'Oh, yes, I do; and I means what I says, too. And what 'arm was it, now? I'm sure that old beggar 'ad been about long enough, and was only a nuisance. But *I* see'd you pour stuff into his beef-tea more times than one.'

''Twas only to make the poor dear sleep, Ted.'

'Yes, sure; and a good long sleep, too. It sent him to kingdom come before his time. And I'm ready to join you in another little game of the same sort, for I know *we'll* never split upon each other.'

'Split on you, my boy! I'd rather 'ang myself first. But do you mean 'Al? What would be the good of it, Ted?'

'Why, ain't he left half the property to me in his will? Didn't he use to tell us so?'

'Lord love you, lad, you're simple. D'ye suppose he hasn't made another will since his marriage, and bequeathed it all to that white-faced 'ussy? In course. We should only be 'elping 'er to it all the sooner.'

'Well, we must fix the blame on 'er, then. That won't be difficult. Make 'un sick first, and put the stuff in 'er pocket or box or summat. *I'll* find the way to do it, never you fear, when the right time comes, but it won't be yet for a long spell. And it won't be never, unless

we're on easy terms with the 'All people, and hin and hout, as if it was our own 'ouse.'

'Ah, if *she'll* let us,' responded his mother; 'but she's a deep 'un, my dear. You should have seen 'er look at me to-night when she saw them few trumpery peaches, as much as to say, "You've bin a-stealing of *my* fruit." I wish it may choke 'er.'

'Well, you mustn't take no more fruit, nor heggs, nor nothink. Let 'em give 'em to us. They'll do it sure enough if we only plays our cards well. Be very haffable to 'em, and hoffer to help 'em in the 'ouse, or advise the young mistress, and then when their heyes is shut, and they think we don't want nothink of 'em, that'll be the time to lay our plans. It'll come as easy for you then to nuss him as it did to nuss his father.'

'You're a clever lad, my Ted, a very clever lad. You ought to have been brought up for a liyar,' said his mother admiringly, only she meant a limb of the law and not an Ananias.

'I'm proud you think so,' returned her son,

‘and if you’re in ’arnest, take my advice and be as haffable as hever you can. When they return home, you go up to the ’All, and take the bride a present. Just a bucket of flowers, or a pincushion, or what not. ’Tain’t the value of the thing, but the hattention as will put ’em off their guard. And don’t say no more spiteful things, mother, but talk a little soft-like about the old ’un, and say ’ow good he was to you and me, and ’ow you loves the old ’ouse for ’is sake. A pint of ile will go further with them than a gallon of vinegar. You see if I ain’t right.’

‘I bclieve you are, Ted, my boy,’ said the widow, ‘and you must have got all your cunning from me, for your father was a downright fool.’

‘Oh, never mind ’im,’ exclaimed Snaley; ‘he won’t never trouble you any more. But do as I say, and you’ll see ’ow things will work up arter a while. Meantime, we’ll think it out. It’ll want a lot of thinking out, mother, and we must go about it very slow and careful, but by ’ook or by crook I’m determined to work my

way back into 'Ighbridge 'All, if I 'ave to step over a grave to git there.'

'Lor', Ted, don't talk like that,' cried Mrs Rushton, with a shudder; 'them's words to *think* on, my dear, but 'tain't safe to speak 'em aloud, not even to your mother.'

'All right, but don't you forget 'em now you've 'eard 'em. I shall be planning this day and night until I see my way to something. Curse that interfering old parson. I'd like to give 'im one for his nob at the same time. If it hadn't been for 'im, you and me would be owning the 'All to-day.'

'That's sure enough, Ted, and I'd like to serve 'im out, and 'is smug-faced wife, too. Well, none of us know what's in the future, nor 'ow things mayn't turn out. I'm glad to see you've got sich a sperrit, Ted, and I 'ope it'll carry you through heverythink.'

'Never fear. But, remember, mother, the *first* thing is to get on a hamicable footing at the 'All. When is they going to settle down there?'

‘I’m not sure. I see the cook this evening, but she didn’t know, which threw me right off my guard, so that when I looked up and see ’em standing close to me I a’most screamed. Lor’! you should ’ave seen the white feathers in her ’at, Ted, and her ’air—which she used to keep tucked up at the school’ouse—’anging all over her face. She thinks she’s a real lady now, she does. There’s no mistake about that.’

‘Well, I doubt if she’ll look like a lady long—not if we puts a pisening job on ’er,’ said Ted.

‘Oh, ’Al wouldn’t believe nothink against ’er. He looked at ’er in that way, it made me quite sick.’

‘I always told you ’e was sweet on ’er,’ replied her son, and there, for the time being, the conversation ended.

After her first visit to the Hall, Paula felt a continually increasing desire to settle in her new home. She panted to be free of the vicarage, and find herself alone with her



husband, and busying herself with the multifarious duties that awaited her. Mrs Measures did everything in her power to make the visit agreeable to her, and was always affectionate and kind, but her manner contrasted too favourably with that of the vicar. Mr Measures was not deficient in courtesy to his fair guest, but he continued so grave and uncommunicative that his presence invariably made Paula uncomfortable, and gave her the sense of being in the way. After a few days she confided her feelings to Hal.

‘I *wish* we were at home,’ she sighed. ‘There is something about the vicarage that depresses me. Do you know, Hal, I am sure Mr Measures has never forgiven me about that little affair with Seth Brunt. He always addresses me in such a solemn manner, and yesterday, when I went into the dining-room, where he was reading, he got up with his book and left the room.’

Hal Rushton flushed with annoyance, but pre-

tended all the same that there was nothing to be annoyed at.

‘Nonsense, my darling. He was only afraid your chatter might distract him from his studies. Clergymen have to read up sometimes, you know, in order to write their sermons. You mustn’t be a goose, and fancy things.’

‘But I don’t think this is fancy, Hal. He was very much annoyed with me at the time. Mrs Measures said so, and I suppose he still suspects me of not having told the truth.’

‘Well, tell it to him now, then, if you think it best, Paula.’

‘How can I say more than I did? I told them Brunt was an old servant, and they would not believe me. It was that odious Mr Gribble who tried to make out that it was improper. Mr Measures would have taken my word for it if it had not been for his suggestions.’

‘Oh, very well,’ replied Hal hastily, “Least said, soonest mended.” I should not open the subject again if I were you.’

It was a sore remembrance to the young

husband, for he knew the interpretation the villagers had put upon it. And to reveal one link of the chain of a story which had been related in the public papers was to give a clue to that portion of Paula's life which he wished so earnestly to be forgotten. But the next moment his arm was round his wife's waist, and his kisses on her cheek.

‘We will go home as soon as ever we can, my darling, on the very day our visit ends here. And then we must think about giving a nice party, and inviting the Measures and our other friends to enjoy our hospitality in return.’

‘We must wait, first, to see who calls on us,’ replied Paula. ‘Perhaps no one will want to know me, dear Hal, and then our party will turn into a *tête-à-tête*.’

‘All the better if it would ; but I have no fear,’ exclaimed her husband.

And he had no need to fear. Before Mrs Hal Rushton had been established in her own house a week everyone of consequence had called on her, some from sheer curiosity, and

others from sheer pleasure in welcoming a new mistress to Highbridge Hall, where Hal's gentle mother, Edith Hereford, was still remembered to have reigned. Lady Bristowe was amongst the first callers, and she came armed with a valuable present out of all proportion to her slight acquaintance with the recipient.

'Now, my dear,' she said, as she fastened a gold bracelet, with a diamond anchor upon it, on Paula's arm, 'you must let me have the pleasure of making my little bride a present. It is customary, you know. Everyone should be prepared with a little offering, and I hope you will wear mine for my sake.'

'But, Lady Bristowe, it is far too valuable. I never possessed anything so handsome in my life. And the gardener tells me I have to thank you for stocking my greenhouse also, and that all these pretty plants came from Tor Abbey. How can I thank you?'

'Why, by looking as pleased and as pretty as you do now, my dear, and by coming to see me at the Abbey, and brightening the old place

up a bit. Now, when are you and your handsome husband coming to dine with me? Please name an early day.'

'I must ask Hal first,' replied Paula, blushing and smiling, 'and he is not at home to-day. But I will write to you, Lady Bristowe, if that will do as well.'

'Well, let us say next Wednesday, and then you can write me if it's not convenient. No ceremony, you know, my dear. Five o'clock dinner, and only an old woman to sit down with. So never mind your fripperies, but bring yourself. That's all I care for. And now, who has been to see you?'

'Not very many people. We only came here the day before yesterday. The Willards and Sheppards have called; they are both old friends of my husband's. And Mrs Measures has looked in to see how I am getting on, and a funny little old lady called Miss Foker.'

'Ah, well, I daresay you'll have more than you want by-and-by. Callers are always a nuisance, town or country. But I want you to

look on me as a friend, my dear. Don't worry yourself to pay me formal visits, but drive over in your little pony chaise whenever you feel inclined, and I shall call in sometimes to see if you fancy a seat in my carriage.'

'Thank you so much,' said Paula.

'It's nothing to thank me for, my dear. Your young face is a boon to me, and I shall not be able to see it too often. Don't forget about Wednesday,' and Lady Bristowe drove off to make room for other visitors.

As her carriage passed down the drive of rhododendrons it caused two foot-passengers to shrink into the bushes to prevent being run over. They were Mrs Gribble and Mrs Axworthy, whose respective lords and masters had decided they must pay the bride at least *one* visit, in order to please the vicar, and who had accordingly set forth in company for the sake of mutual support. Mrs Gribble was arrayed in her celebrated plum-coloured satin, with a black velvet bonnet, ornamented with artificial geraniums, and Mrs Axworthy wore a black cloth cloak, down

to her heels, and a bonnet of dirty white silk, which boasted of two green feathers gracefully drooping on one side. Both of the ladies wore white cotton gloves for the occasion, and were looking very red and flustered and uncomfortable.

‘Well, I never!’ exclaimed Mrs Axworthy, as the carriage passed them, ‘if her ladyship ain’t been before us. Whatever makes her condescend so? I call it bemeaning her rank. But there’s the chay waiting at the door. ’Urry up a bit, do, Mrs Gribble, ma’am, or we shall miss ’er, and I don’t feel as if I could make another journey up ’ere in this ’eat.’

Paula, in fact, having thought she would have no more visitors that afternoon, was just about to assume her walking attire, in order to be ready for Hal when he returned to take her for a drive, and when she heard that the churchwardens’ wives were in the drawing-room she decided to put it on before she encountered them. Her face flushed and her hand trembled as she heard their names. She could not but remember what

they had said of her, and how they had withdrawn their vulgar little children from the contamination of her society, and she would have been less than woman if the near prospect of meeting them had not made her blood rise and called up all her pride. She lingered a little longer over her toilet than was necessary, and descended to the drawing-room, slowly drawing on a long pair of mouse-coloured gloves. She entered the door, carrying her graceful head erect, like a stag that scents danger in the air, and bowing to her guests, dropped into a chair, and waited for them to open the ball. Mrs Gribble and Mrs Axworthy became very uncomfortable at the coolness and formality of their reception. They had expected the self-conscious young woman, who had been detected in so grave a breach of discipline as to be compelled to quit her situation, to be overcome by the condescension of their proffered reconciliation, instead of which she received them as if she were an injured and offended queen, and they two subjects humbly suing for forgive-



ness. They were at an utter loss how to begin the conversation; but at last Mrs Axworthy took heart of grace to become the spokeswoman.

‘Mrs Gribble and me ’ave come, Mrs Rushton, ma’am, by the wish of our good gentlemen, to wish you and Mr Rushton ’ealth and ’appiness in your wedded life, and to ’ope as all bygones may be bygones.’

‘You are very good,’ replied Paula, with studied formality.

‘Perhaps you ’ardly expected to see us, ma’am, considering how we parted. But we ’ave all known Mr ’Al from a boy, as you may say, and should be sorry not to be on visiting terms with his lady. Mrs Gribble, ma’am, I think I speak your sentiments with my own?’

‘Oh, certainly, yes,’ responded Mrs Gribble nervously, as Paula still sat silent before them, and apparently busily employed in buttoning her long gloves.

‘You ’ave a fine place ’ere, ma’am,’ continued Mrs Axworthy, with a kind of desperation. ‘I

can remember the time when the first Mrs Rush-ton (Miss Edith Hereford as was) lived in it. Ah! *she* was a real lady, Mr 'Al's mamma was, and come of a most respectable family. Poor dear! Poor dear! It's a pity she couldn't 'ave lived to see her son grow up. This was 'er place, you know.'

'So I have heard,' replied Paula.

'She brought it to the old gentlemen on their marriage. Well! well! there 'ave been sad changes. Have you made the acquaintance of Miss Brown, our new teacher, yet? Such a sweet lady—so haffable and free-like, and "oily" respectable.'

'Indeed! That must be a great advantage,' said Paula, with a curled lip; 'I hope the children will profit by it.'

'Oh, they adores Miss Brown,' exclaimed Mrs Gribble, finding her tongue for the first time. 'My Lottie and Carrie, they says to me as she is a real lady, and 'as the very best of eddication.'

'That must be a great satisfaction to you,

Lottie and Carrie being such excellent judges,' replied her hostess quietly.

Meanwhile, Mrs Axworthy had left her seat, and approaching the window looked out on the wide smooth-shaven lawn.

'Lor', what an 'andsome bit o' grass. 'Asn't Mr 'Al made it bigger of late, ma'am?'

'I believe my husband has taken in some of the paddock this year.'

'It would accommodate a heap o' people. I suppose you'll be giving garden "feets" and carpet 'ops, ma'am, to celebrate your coming 'ome?'

'I do not know. Mr Rushton and I do not care much about society.'

'Deepdale will be expecting as much,' put in Mrs Gribble. 'When Mr 'Al's mother was married, the 'ole village was "feeted," and they give dinners and suppers and dances.'

'Indeed!' said Paula. 'But I don't think we know sufficient people to give parties for. There are so few gentlemen's families in Deepdale.'

She meant this for a thrust, and it went home.

‘Oh, dear!’ cried Mrs Axworthy, tossing her head, ‘I should ’ave said there was a many. I’m sure I know above twenty ladies myself, and then there are all their good gentlemen and little families. Why, Mrs Gribble here makes up four by ’erself alone.’

‘Oh, I beg your pardon,’ returned Paula, wilfully misconstruing her meaning, ‘you are talking of a school treat. No, I don’t think it would quite do for me to give one yet awhile; besides, I very much dislike children.’

‘Mrs Gribble,’ exclaimed Mrs. Axworthy, red with indignation, ‘I think it is time for us to be going, ma’am,’ and they rose from their chairs simultaneously, and advanced to Paula with the idea of shaking hands, not because they felt cordially disposed towards her, but because they knew of no other way to get out of the room. But Paula, anticipating their design, rose also, and moved towards the bell. She would *not* shake hands with these women, she said to her-

self indignantly. So as they were still standing before her, ignorant how to take the initiative, her servant answered her summons, and saying very quietly, 'Show Mrs Gribble and Mrs Axworthy out, Susan,' she bowed to them as she had done on entering, and turned away. The churchwardens' 'ladies,' red and flustered, understood but too well that they were dismissed, and followed the servant from the room. They did not dare trust themselves to speak till they were half-way down the drive, and then their indignation burst forth in words.

'Did you *ever*!' exclaimed Mrs Axworthy. 'I never see sich airs in all my life. Coming down in 'er 'at, and putting on 'er gloves, and never so much as shaking us by the 'and. The coolness and the himperence of it all! Her marriage must 'ave turned 'er 'ead.'

'It's them Measureses and Bristowes as 'ave done it,' said her friend. 'Took 'er out of 'er station, till she don't know what she would be after. Did you see 'er bowing and smirking at us? I could 'ave tore her gloves and 'er 'at

off and trampled on them. Six-button gloves, indeed, and that pale they will be siled in an afternoon. And what *is* she, I should like to know! A trumperious school teacher. I could cry with vexation to think as we 'ad ever demeaned ourselves to call on 'er.'

'Did you 'ear 'er say, Mrs Gribble, ma'am, as there were so few "gentlemen's families" in Deepdale? Don't she call Mr Gribble a gentleman, and Mr Haxworthy? Why, what would she 'ave? I bet they're better gentlemen than the low feller as took tea with 'er in the school-house. But that's all forgotten, of course. Mrs 'Al Rushton's going to queen it over us all, never mind what Miss Stafford chose to do. But, mark my words, she won't be able to give none of 'er parties unless the ladies of Deepdale are invited. She won't 'ave enough to make a party unless she 'as us. She can't give a garden "feet" for only Lady Bristowe and Mrs Measures, though she *did* try to treat us as if we was the dirt under her feet.'

I'll never forgive Gribble for 'aving pulled

me into sich a scrape,' said the other lady. 'I says to 'im this morning, Mr Gribble, I says, you can't make a silk pus out of a sow's hear, and if you marry that young woman fifty times hover, she won't never be more respectable than she was in the school'ouse. But gentlemen is that obstinate. He says that where the vicar goes we did ought to go. And so far he's right, but I won't stand being trod upon by an 'ussy like that, and so I shall tell 'im this very night.'

And so nursing their righteous wrath, and spitting out venom upon the offender, they returned home with a worse grievance against the ex-school teacher than they had ever had before.

Paula laughed when she related the interview to her husband, but Hal was indignant that the women should have presumed to call upon her.

'How *dared* they?' he questioned angrily. 'Do they imagine for a moment that, because you once occupied a situation that placed you on a seeming equality, I am going to allow you to mix on friendly terms with all the scum of

Deepdale? Why, the laundress and the butcher's wife will be leaving their cards on you next, and expecting to be admitted to the drawing-room.'

'I shouldn't have minded it if they had come in a friendly spirit,' said Paula, 'but it was evident their visit was dictated only by curiosity, or a desire to show me that *they* did not consider that my marriage made any difference in my position. No, I couldn't stand it at all. I hope I was not *too* rude, but I felt it was incumbent on me to put them in their place at once, and I hope they will never come near me again.'

I forbid your going down to see them if they do,' said Hal. 'I won't have the petals of my White Rose sullied by contact with them.'

The following evening at tea Paula said archly,—

'I've had some more visitors, Hal. Guess who they were.'

'How can I tell? Old Potter's wife, perhaps, or Mrs Snoad from Haltham.'



‘Oh, dear, no. Somebody much nearer home. Your stepmother and her son.’

Hal made a grimace of unmitigated aversion.

‘Well, the less you see of them the better I shall be pleased.’

‘But, Hal dear, I think you’re a little hard on Mrs Rushton. She seemed full of good wishes for our happiness, and see what she brought me as a wedding gift.’

And Paula uncovered from its paper wrappings something which looked like a small pillow, covered with spotted muslin and pink ribbon bows.

‘What on earth is it?’

‘A pincushion, dear. Rather a large one, I confess, but it will do for the spare room. But it was kind of the old woman to think of us, wasn’t it?’

‘Humph! I would rather she didn’t. Her thoughts are like wormwood, and apt to turn everything to gall. Where did she get this atrocious offering?’

‘Oh, Hal, she made it all herself, and she apologised for its being such a humble gift, but she isn’t rich, you know. I couldn’t help, somehow, being rather sorry for her when she mentioned her regret at leaving the Hall. You see, I couldn’t appreciate the joy of being here myself as much as I do if I couldn’t realise what the loss of it would be. I assure you the tears were in her eyes when she looked at the improvements in the garden. And she was *so* shabby. I don’t believe she can have had a new cloak for years.’

‘Well, my child, that’s not my fault, nor her own either, for she must have feathered her nest considerably whilst she was with me, and might easily afford a new turn-out by this time. Oh, Paula, you don’t know how I hate that woman. Sometimes I think she worried my poor father into the grave before his time.’

‘Hal, darling, that *must* be fancy. I confess her appearance doesn’t impress me, and Mr Snaley is still worse than his mother, but

it must certainly be a great change from the Hall to Wavertree Cottage. Mrs Rushton complained a good deal of rheumatism. She is afraid the little pond at the back of the cottage makes it damp.'

'And do you want me to reinstate them both here in consequence, sweetheart? Because, I won't.'

'Oh, no, dear, of course not; only, they must miss the luxuries they enjoyed here. Mrs Rushton told me her kitchen garden had been so much neglected nothing would grow in it, and she can't eat Farmer Rich's butter after that she used to superintend the churning of it at the Hall.'

'That was only to try and work on your sympathy. I have already told the old woman that she can have all she requires from our dairy.'

'That was very good of you, Hal. I'm afraid we vexed her sadly that evening about the peaches. She apologised so much she made me feel quite ashamed, and I said we never

should have taken the basket from her had we not thought that she had gathered them to save Potter the trouble.'

'*That* was a cracker, my darling; however, let it pass. And what had the noble Ted to say for himself?'

'He brought me that bouquet of chrysanthemums in the Chinese bowl. His mother told me they came from Haltham, as he could find nothing good enough for me in Deepdale?'

At this Hal laughed long and lustily.

'Ted Snaley turned into a ladies' man!' he exclaimed. 'What next, I wonder! If you can achieve such transformations as these, Paula, I shall not be surprised to hear of the widow coming out as a professional beauty.'

And amidst the mirth engendered by this fancy the theme of Mrs Rushton's visit gave place to some other subject.

## CHAPTER IV.

### LADY BRISTOWE.

THE Bristowe acquaintance promised after a while to become a nuisance. Hal hated dinner-parties, and all kinds of festivities away from his own home, but her ladyship was so pressing they hardly knew how to refuse her.

‘We *must* go this once, Hal,’ pleaded Paula. ‘I don’t look forward to it any more than you do, but the old lady has certainly been very kind to us, and we must not be ungrateful.’

‘Very well,’ acquiesced the young man, in a tone of dissatisfaction, ‘for the first time, then, and the last. I’m not going to drag myself away from my dogs and horses to make small-talk at a dinner table. I gave all that sort of

thing up long ago. I believe I have a suit of dress clothes somewhere, but I very much doubt if I can get into them.'

'I've treated you too well, you lazy boy, and you've grown too stout,' said Paula, laughing.

'Seriously though, my darling, don't you remember our compact, that neither of us was to interfere with the amusements of the other? Go and dine with all the old ladies in the neighbourhood if it pleases you, but leave me in the stables. I never *was* a society man, you know. I believe that if I had seen you first in a drawing-room I never should have become intimate enough with you to propose.'

'Well, I'll never ask you again, dear—I promise you that—but just this once you will come to please me. Whoever heard of a bride going out to dine at the house of a new acquaintance by herself? It would be too funny.'

'It would be the only funny thing about it then. I anticipate a frightfully dull evening.'

'So do I; but it would be a thousand times worse without you. After this, if she ever asks

us again, I shall tell her plainly that we intend to give up all formal visiting whatever.'

So Hal gave in, and on a certain lovely afternoon in September he drove his wife over to Tor Abbey. He wore a dust-coat over his evening suit, and her white dress was well covered up from view, and they alighted at the Abbey looking very fresh and handsome, and suitably attired, and were received by Lady Bristowe with enthusiasm.

They found her sitting in the grand old library, through the stained glass windows of which the setting sun cast violet and ruby shades on the bindings of the books and the carved oak cases, and gave the room the appearance of an oriel chapel. Sarah Brennan was seated in one of the window recesses, occupied with needlework, but Lady Bristowe did not take the trouble to introduce her to either of her guests.

'Now, I call this really kind of you,' she said, as she embraced Paula and shook hands with Hal, 'to take the trouble to drive all this

way to dine with a stupid old woman. You know I said you would meet no one but myself. I have persuaded Mr Vernon, our curate, to make a fourth at table, just to keep Mr Rushton company, but he is such a quiet creature he counts for nothing. And now you will go upstairs, dear, and remove your things. Brennan, show Mrs Rushton the way up to the yellow room, and assist her to dismantle. Mr Rushton, my man will take your overcoat. It has been a lovely day, hasn't it—more like July than September? And we shall have October here in a day or two. Dear, dear, how the time flies. Pray sit down and make yourself comfortable.'

And Lady Bristowe reseated herself in her capacious arm-chair, and continued to chatter, with the view of amusing her guest until the party should be reinforced. Meanwhile, Sarah Brennan had led Paula up a wide staircase, lined with family portraits and oil paintings, to a large bedroom, hung with old-fashioned yellow satin, where she deposited her hat and



cloak, and ruffled up the pretty curls upon her forehead by aid of the Venetian mirror on the dressing-table. As she did so she became conscious of a very evil pair of eyes watching her movements, in the person of Miss Brennan. The companion was, indeed, feeling anything but well-inclined towards the new-comer. She knew the position she had held in Deepdale, and resented the idea of a village schoolmistress being treated by Lady Bristowe as an equal, whilst *she* was ignored, as if she had been the lowest servant in the establishment. *Her* father had been a thriving tradesman in the Italian warehouse line, and she would like to know what more Mrs Rushton's father had been. Paula, seeing the look with which she regarded her, and attributing it to illness, asked her kindly if she felt well.

‘Perfectly so, thank you,’ returned Miss Brennan, with thin pursed-up lips, ‘and if you’re ready, perhaps we had better go downstairs again.’

She would not have dared address Paula in

so familiar a manner before her employer, but she felt aggressively bold now that they were alone. Paula recognised the feeling, and with a slight flush on her face, retraced her steps to the library.

‘Ah, how pretty you look,’ cried Lady Bristowe effusively, as she entered it. ‘Mr Rushton, you have the handsomest wife for miles round Deepdale.’

‘I know that,’ replied Hal, laughing.

‘And I am very jealous of you, sir, and want to share your spoils with you. I wish I had found her out first. Then I should have carried her off, and you would have been out of the running altogether. Come and sit down by me, my love. Why, how old are you? You don’t look twenty in that white frock.’

‘Oh, I am much more than that, Lady Bristowe. I was twenty-five on my last birthday.’

‘And not married till then? What were the men about not to run off with you long ago? And where did you live before you came to Deepdale?’

‘Chiefly with my mother,’ replied Paula, colouring.

‘Ah, your mother. She is living still, is she not? How sorry she must have been to part with you. By-the-way, I cannot find your dear father’s name in the Royal Navy list. Lieutenant George Stafford, was he not? And I think you said he died at sea. Poor dear, how sad. But how is it his name is not down in the *Navy List*?’

Paula coloured rosily. The question took her by surprise. She had no wish to disclose more of her private affairs than was absolutely necessary, but Lady Bristowe’s pertinacity left her no alternative but to tell the truth. And Sarah Brennan, from her sheltered window seat, had seen the blush, and noted it.

‘I called myself “Stafford” whilst I was at the schoolhouse, Lady Bristowe, but it is not my real name. I was so poor that I was obliged to work for my living, but I saw no necessity to drag my father’s name in the dirt. He was Lieutenant George Sutton, not Stafford.’

‘Oh, Sutton, Sutton, of course that makes all the difference,’ exclaimed her ladyship. ‘Brennan, bring me the *Navy List*. Ah, here it is, of course, in the deceased officers’ list. Lieutenant George Sutton, R.N., of H.M.S. *Thunderer*. Ah, there is no more noble service on the face of the earth than the Royal Navy, and I am glad you thought to uphold its name. I admire you for having worked to help your dear mother, though, and “All’s well that ends well,” eh, Mr Rushton? But here is Mr Vernon, and now we shall have some dinner.’

‘A thousand apologies for being behind my time, Lady Bristowe,’ said the curate briskly, ‘but these parish duties are terribly exacting.’

‘Well, now you *are* come, let me introduce you to Mr and Mrs Rushton,’ chuckled his hostess, ‘and give Mrs Rushton your arm, and take her into dinner, and we will follow suit.’

The men-servants who announced the meal threw open the door of the dining-room and ushered them into a repast more fit for a party of four-and-twenty than of four. The good-

natured Lady Bristowe seated herself, panting, at the head of her table, with Hal and Paula on either side of her and the curate opposite, and applied herself steadily to pressing the different dishes on their acceptance. After a while, however, and when all her guests were busily engaged, each with a powdered flunkey behind his chair, she reverted to the subject of Paula's mother.

'And so your poor dear mother is left all alone? That must be very sad for her. Cannot you persuade her to follow you to Deepdale, Mrs Rushton?'

Paula shook her head.

'My husband was good enough to ask her to reside altogether with us,' she said, 'but she would not come. She loves her own home too well, and she has many friends round her.'

'And where may her home be, my dear?'

Paula hesitated. She felt as if so much that she would rather have left unsaid was being dragged out of her against her will, yet how could she refuse to answer so simple and

natural a question. The idea flashed through her mind to give a false address, but she had not the time to mature it, and so in her confusion she blurted out the truth.

‘At Grassdene,’ she said, in a low voice.

‘Grassdene!’ echoed Lady Bristowe, ‘surely that is not far from Lynmouth? My sister, Mrs Archibald Craig (the wife of Captain Craig, commanding the *Lightning* gunboat—all in the Royal Navy, you see, my dear), lives at Lynmouth, and I go down to see her almost every year. I shall make a point, next time I am there, of going over to Grassdene and making the acquaintance of your dear mother. Mrs Craig will like to know her, too, I am sure. We have such a fellow-feeling for anyone who is connected with the dear old service.’

Paula glanced hurriedly at her husband, as if to seek for counsel. But he was looking fixedly at his plate, with something of a frown upon his brow. So she took it upon herself to answer.

‘You are very kind, Lady Bristowe, but my mother is somewhat of an invalid, and never receives any visitors. I hope you will not be offended with me for saying so, but you must not take any trouble on her account. She lives a very secluded life, and goes nowhere.’

‘An invalid!’ cried her ladyship. ‘Oh, that is very sad. But my sister, Mrs Craig, might be of use to her. She has a magnificent place in Lynmouth, with any amount of hot-houses, and a few grapes, or a pine-apple, or any delicacies of that sort, are always acceptable in sickness. I shall write to-morrow to Mrs Craig and tell her to lose no time in showing what attention she can to Mrs Sutton.’

‘Oh, pray—*pray* don’t,’ exclaimed Paula involuntarily, but with so much fervour in her tone that the attention of all at the table was directed to her. As soon as ever the words had escaped her lips, she would have recalled them, but it was too late. She blushed painfully as she felt the surprise she had evoked by

her *brusquerie*, and the more so when Hal remarked,—

‘That is not a very polite return for Lady Bristowe’s kindness, Paula.’

‘Oh, I hope you don’t think me ungrateful,’ she said, turning to her hostess with moistened eyes. ‘I cannot thank you enough for the offer, but my mother is so sensitive—so nervous—she shrinks so terribly from seeing or speaking with strangers, that I thought—I was afraid—’

‘Oh, never mind, my dear,’ interposed Lady Bristowe, with a shade less warmth in her demeanour; ‘of course Mrs Craig would have known how to show her desire to be of use without intruding on Mrs Sutton’s privacy, but if you think it would be a distress instead of a pleasure to her, we will say no more about it.’ Then, turning from her altogether, she addressed the curate instead: ‘Do you know when the rector is coming home again, Mr Vernon? He seems to me to be taking a very long holiday.’

Mr Vernon replied that they confidently ex-



pected the rector to take the pulpit the Sunday after next, and then the conversation drifted on parochial matters, and Paula sat by and listened listlessly, feeling very much as if she were all of a sudden in disgrace. But the idea of Lady Bristowe and her sister bearing down upon Grassdene in one of their grand carriages, and perhaps without any warning, to find Mrs Sutton in *déshabille*, and to see poor little Paul or encounter some neighbour who had known her during her first married life, had been too much for her susceptibility. She was very silent during the remainder of the meal, but as the ladies rose from table her hostess passed her stout arm through Paula's slender one with a familiarity that told her the little annoyance was forgotten.

‘I don't know when I have taken such a fancy to anyone as I have to you, my dear,’ she said, on their way to the drawing-room. ‘I quite feel as if I had found a daughter. I only wish you *were* my daughter. I wish my dear son Wallace may find such another wife for him-

self; but he is a lawless fellow, and says he will never marry. I have never shown you my Wallace's portrait,' she continued, halting before a full-length oil painting of a young naval officer. 'Here is the dear boy, you see, taken in his first epaulettes. Isn't it a fine face? A little heavy-browed, perhaps, like his dear father the Admiral, but good all round, and the sweetest temper in the world.'

'Like his mother,' said Paula, smiling.

'Ah, my dear, what merit is there in having a good temper when no one presumes to ruffle it? Here have I been from girlhood, surrounded with everything I could possibly desire, and, except for losing the Admiral, without a trouble.'

'And the separation from your only son,' suggested Paula.

'But that is inevitable. He is in the Royal Navy, and it would have broken my heart if he had refused to enter it. So, you see, I have so little to complain of that the difficulty

would be to find something to lose my temper about.'

'You have such an amiable disposition, Lady Bristowe. Some people will fall out with themselves sooner than with no one at all.'

'What a terrible misfortune it must be, though. That is like poor dear Brennan. I have had that young woman in my service five years, and I don't know when I have seen her smile. I allow her a great many more privileges than I ever agreed to do, yet she is never happy. Ah! here she comes, with her long face. Well Brennan, what is it?'

'If you please, your ladyship, shall you require my services for an hour or so? If not, I thought I would take a stroll before bedtime.'

'Dear me, no. Haven't I got Mrs Rushton? Go and take a stroll, by all manner of means. Make yourself happy, Brennan, that is all I ask. Will you take my pets with you?'

'If your ladyship wishes it.'

'No; on second thoughts, they might incommode you, and I should like to show the

darlings to Mrs Rushton. Tell James to bring them all round before the drawing-room windows. I always keep up my breed of Blenheim spaniels, my dear. The Admiral used to say they were the only dogs a lady should possess. I have three little pets in the house, but several more in the stables. Are you fond of animals?'

'Very much so, Lady Bristowe. We have some beautiful setters and pointers at home, but no dog small enough to live indoors.'

'Oh, I shall have to give you one of my Blenheim puppies. I believe my coachman has some just ready to leave the mother. It is not *everyone* I would give one of my puppies to, my dear. They are thoroughbred dogs, you know, and my coachman doesn't like the breed going out of the Abbey. But *you* are an exception, and I should like to think you had one in your possession.'

'You are too good to me,' faltered Paula, feeling a presentiment all the while that her ladyship's goodness would have some unpleasant termination.

The little dogs were duly admired, and the pup, greatly against the coachman's inclination, selected from the litter, and Paula had just taken it in her arms, and was fondling and caressing it, when the gentlemen came in from the dining-room and learned how it had come into her possession.

‘You are indeed highly favoured, Mrs Rushton,’ observed Mr Vernon. ‘I don’t know when Lady Bristowe has given one of her little dogs away before. I remember our rector’s wife giving her some very broad hints on the subject once, but she was deaf as well as dumb.’

‘If I gave to one, I must give to all, but *this* is a very different case,’ replied Lady Bristowe. ‘I look upon Mrs Rushton as my adopted daughter.’

‘Oh, indeed, I was not aware of it. You have known this young lady, doubtless, for a long time?’

‘Well, not so long, counted by weeks and months perhaps, but we feel as if we had known each other all our lives, don’t we,

my dear?' said her ladyship, patting Paula's cheek.

Paula's large grey eyes looked up gratefully, but she said nothing. She could not echo her hostess's sentiment, but she thought it very good of her to express it. Presently Lady Bristowe drew Hal away to admire the prospect from a bay window, and Mr Vernon was left, comparatively speaking, alone with Paula.

'Am I right,' he inquired, 'in thinking that, not long ago, you held the position of school teacher in Deepdale?'

'Quite right,' she replied; 'I was there for over two years.'

But she wondered as she said it if the fact of her former position would ever be forgotten, or cease to be spoken of.

'I thought I could not be mistaken,' rejoined her companion. 'I was over there at the local examinations last year, and thought how much credit your pupils did you. And you gave up your appointment to get married?'

Paula bowed her head.

‘I must congratulate you. I have not had the pleasure of meeting Mr Rushton before this evening, but I have often heard of him. I believe he is the son of Farmer Rushton of Highbridge. Was there not a widow?’

‘Yes; but she is not Hal’s mother, and she does not live with us,’ said Paula.

‘Well, I am very pleased to have been introduced to you. The Measures are great friends of mine, but I little thought the Mrs Rushton I heard of as staying at Deepdale vicarage was the same as Miss Stafford. I hope this will not prove to be our last meeting.’

He was captivated with the sweet face and bearing of Hal Rushton’s young wife, but he was at the same time slightly puzzled. He did not believe it possible there could be anything to be said against the guest of Mrs Measures and Lady Bristowe, and yet surely some unpleasant reports had reached him respecting the departure of the school teacher from Deepdale. Mr Vernon kept turning the two things over in his head without arriving

at any satisfactory conclusion, and left Tor Abbey without having unravelled the mystery. Certainly he could believe no harm of pretty Mrs Rushton. It must be concluded, therefore, that the rumours which had reached him were untrue. With the curate's departure the little party broke up. Hal wrapped up his wife carefully in her large cloak, and placed her in her pony chaise, and after a great many affectionate farewells from Lady Bristowe, and entreaties that they would soon visit her again, they took their way home. For some minutes Hal drove in silence, flicking the pony in a way that proved he was not altogether in a good temper, and then he said interrogatively,—

‘Well, Paula?’

‘What is it, dear? I am afraid you proved a true prophet, and have not enjoyed your evening. Yet the poor old lady did all she possibly could to make it pleasant to us.’

‘I wasn’t thinking of that. My mind was ruminating on several things that occurred during dinner, and which make me say that



the less we encourage Lady Bristowe's familiarity the better. She is a kind woman, but a very pushing one, and if she ever suspects there is a secret concerning you she will not rest until she has discovered what it is. I wish you hadn't accepted that dog from her. It will be another obligation to make breaking the intimacy more difficult.'

'I wish I had not,' replied his wife, looking down on the little animal in her lap, 'but I hardly knew how to refuse it. She presses her gifts on one so warmly. It seems impossible to reject them without giving offence.'

'I always doubt these sudden affections,' continued Hal. 'It is ridiculous to hear her talk of you in such an extravagant manner, whom she has only known for a month. Such natures are apt to cool just as suddenly as they have warmed, and I won't have you taken up and cast off as if you were an old shoe. We must return Lady Bristowe's hospitality in our small way; but don't accept any more invitations to Ter Abbey, Paula. Lay all the blame on me. Say

that I won't go out into society, and that you cannot go without me. We shall be happier by ourselves, love, believe me.'

'I know we shall,' replied Paula fervently, 'and for my own part I wish we had never been introduced to Lady Bristowe at all. She has already been the cause of your speaking impatiently to me, and I would "cut" everybody in the world sooner than they should come in the slightest degree between us.'

'Now, darling, you are rushing into the other extreme. No one shall ever come between us, neither is there the slightest necessity for "cutting" Lady Bristowe, who has really done us a great honour. But such honours are rather above us, Paula. We cannot return them in like measure, and neither you nor I want to be the *protégés* of a grand lady. I am only a farmer's son, and have never pretended to be anything more—a country gentleman, perhaps, you may call me, but not fit to provide small-talk for late dinner-parties. I hate them, Paula, they are so much time wasted to me; and if

you love me as you say you do, you will give them up for my sake, and let me live my quiet, peaceful life at home.'

'*If I love you,*' said Paula reproachfully. 'Oh, Hal, can you have any doubt of it? From this moment I will never accept a formal invitation again. Only tell me what you wish, dearest, and it shall be done.'

'My love, don't think I want you to sacrifice your own inclinations for me. Go where you will, but leave me at home. I am so much happier there. But we must give some sort of an entertainment in return for the civility of our neighbours, and that as soon as you can manage it.'

'Let it be a garden-party then, Hal, for the weather is quite fine enough for it, and it will not worry you so much. We can have tennis and croquet and a dance upon the lawn, and an *al fresco* meal laid out on tables on the terrace. Do you think we know enough people to make it pleasant?'

'I believe so. There will be the Measures,

of course, and he has a brother at Rodney Wold with half-a-dozen lads and lasses. Then there is Lady Bristowe and the Ashfolds, and Willards and Marchmonts, and you must ask Miss Foker and her brother and the Borrowdales—'

'And the Gribbles and Axworthys,' said Paula slyly.

'By Jove, no! They never enter my house on *my* invitation. But I know several families out Pennett way, old friends of my mother's people, who I feel sure would be delighted to make my wife's acquaintance. Oh, we shall make up a nice party, never fear; and there is a quartette in Haltham (Spring, the stationer, is one of them) who go out to play for dances, and sing glees between whiles, and will enliven the festivities considerably.'

'Hal,' said Paula presently, 'we shall have to ask your stepmother and Edward Snaley.'

Her husband turned his head and regarded her steadfastly in the face.

'Are you serious?' he asked.

‘I am, indeed. I am afraid people will think it very strange if they are left out.’

‘Let them think what they choose. It won’t hurt us.’

‘But, Hal dear, won’t it look just a little “caddish” not to ask them? As if we were ashamed to be seen with them?’

‘But that’s just it. I *am* ashamed of them—heartily and thoroughly ashamed—not because they are humble, but because they are so infernally low-minded and vulgar. No, Paula, it is not to be thought of for a minute. Be kind to Mrs Rushton and her son, if you will—I would not check your generous nature for the world—but you cannot ask them to a mixed party. It would be an insult to everyone of your lady visitors.’

‘I am sorry,’ sighed Paula. ‘It is very awkward. I wish they did not live in Deepdale.’

‘So do I. But it is one of the scrapes I have got you into, and you must make the best of it. If giving a party necessitates the

presence of the *ci-devant* Mrs Snaley and her beauteous offspring, the party must be given up.'

'Very well, dear, we will think no more about it. What day shall we fix upon?'

'Oh, make it an early one. Deepdalers are not used to long invitations. Say a week hence, the fifth of October. That will give you plenty of time to make your preparations.'

'I will have such a *lovely* spread,' exclaimed Paula, with the enthusiasm of a young housekeeper, 'a *dejeuner à la fourchette*. That sounds well for Deepdale, doesn't it, Hal?'

'Capital! But what does it mean?'

'Luncheon and tea combined, eaten at four o'clock,' replied his wife, laughing. 'It shall be a nice one, I assure you. I begin to feel quite excited over it, and will make out the list of guests and write the invitations the first thing to-morrow morning.'

The young people did not speak of their project except to one another, and yet some-

how the news got bruited abroad, and by the afternoon of the next day everybody in Deepdale knew that Mrs Hal Rushton was about to give a garden-party (a 'feet,' as Mrs Axworthy termed it) at Highbridge Hall, and that the Haltham quartette had been hired for the occasion. All the 'ladies' were on the *qui vive* in a moment, wondering *who* would be invited, and speculating on what they themselves ought to wear on the auspicious occasion.

'For, in course,' as Mrs Axworthy remarked to Mrs Gribble, 'we shall hall be hasked, as is only our doo. I'm sure she howes it to us, Mrs Gribble, ma'am, for a shabbier wedding visit I never see, with never a bit of cake nor a drop of wine to drink their 'ealths. But no doubt they was reserving their hospitality for this "feet," and will come out handsome now. What are you thinking of wearing ma'am?'

'Well, I hardly know,' returned Mrs Gribble. 'Of course, I must respeck myself, and yet I don't want to seem to do too much honner to

the young person Mr 'Al has married. I've a sweet green *muslin de laine* that I 'ad for my Carrie's christening, and I think if I was to trim it with a little white lace, and put a gold butterfly or so in my Sunday bonnet, it would look very hairy and summer like.'

'Charming,' said her friend; 'and I'm glad to 'ear you'll wear green, as then we won't clash, for I've settled on my pink silk skirt, with a black velvet bodice, and a 'at with my white ostrich plumes in it. If I can carry it out as I 'ave it in my mind's heye, I don't think there will be another costume like it in the whole "feet." The pleasantest part of these little gatherings is planning your dress beforehand, and we mustn't forget as our good gentlemen 'old a 'igh position in Deepdale.'

'Well, naterally everyone will be hasking who *we* are. I think I shall let my Lottie and Carrie go in book-muslin and blue ribbins. There's nothing sweeter, and the frocks they 'ad for the last examinations are as good as noo.



I wish Mr Stubbins 'adn't cut their 'air so short yesterday. It looks genteeler tied up with ribbins. But there, one can't 'ave heverythink.'

'I'm a-longing to see the hinvites,' said Mrs Axworthy. 'I suppose they will be sent round to-morrer. Jane Clark told Haxworthy that she was a-writing of them hall to-day.'

The morrow arrived, however, without bringing the expected invitations, but the ladies did not lose hope. They could not conceive it possible that any party could be given at Highbridge Hall without including their names. They still evinced the greatest interest in listening to the account of all that was to be done on the occasion; of how a large marquee was to be pitched on the lawn for the refreshments, and Mr Rushton had ordered six dozen of champagne from Haltham, and a professed cook was coming over to superintend the making of jellies and savoury pies.

'I should call it redickerlous for such as '*er*,' confided Mrs Axworthy to her crony Gribble, 'unless it was to show honner where honner's

doo. The fact is, ma'am, Mrs 'Al Rushton is beginning to see it will be best to keep friends with them as can open their mouths or shut 'em as they feel inclined. She's a sharp 'un, take my word for it.'

But when the days went on without bringing the expected invitations, and little Miss Foker came over and triumphantly displayed the letter she had received, asking herself and her brother to the Hall for the fifth of October, the churchwardens and their ladies began to suspect there must be something wrong.

'She couldn't never mean to leave us *hout!*' exclaimed Mrs Axworthy, with her face the colour of a beet.

'Impossible! Think of the himperence of it,' replied Mrs Gribble; 'why, it's as good as putting her character in our 'ands.'

'Oh, it's a beauty she'll get from me when I've a chance to give it 'er,' cried the other, 'hinsulting us before the whole neighbourhood in this manner. Deepdale ladies ain't good enough company for Mrs 'Al Rushton, I

suppose. She must 'ave barrow knights, widders, and hearls and countesses for her garden "feet." Very good, she'll see. She's made henemies of hus two, Mrs Gribble, who might have been 'er friends, and it remains to be seen which on us will be the wuss for it.'

'It's *sickening*,' retorted Mrs Gribble, as from the window they watched the arrival of the marquee and some dozens of garden chairs from Haltham.

When the day of the party arrived everything was most propitious. The weather was beautiful—not a cloud appeared in the blue sky—not a guest disappointed them by sending a tardy excuse for his non-appearance, for everybody was but too glad to come. Mrs Measures brought a goodly array of nephews and nieces, and Lady Bristowe was accompanied by several young people from her own parish. To crown all, Mrs Willard, one of Hal's oldest friends, in addition to her own family, begged to be allowed to introduce the Countess of Warden, who was anxious to join the garden-party.

Paula, who was looking the quintessence of a white rose in her simple muslin dress and white chip hat, was almost disposed to be overwhelmed at first by receiving such distinguished guests, but in dispensing her simple hospitality to them she soon became at her ease. Lady Warden, who was quite a young woman, appeared to enjoy herself as much as anybody there, and after playing at lawn tennis all the afternoon, and disposing of an excellent meal in the marquee, chose Hal Rushton to lead off Sir Roger de Coverley with her on the lawn, and finally left them full of regret that the Earl had not had such a good time with her. The Haltham quartette discoursed sweet music all the day, and the strains from their instruments were carried over the grounds of Highbridge Hall into the village, making the listeners green with envy, whilst the banquet was declared to be the best thing of the kind ever seen in Deepdale.

‘Paula, my dear, you have surpassed yourself,’ exclaimed Mrs Measures, as she surveyed the long

tables, bright with sparkling glass and burnished silver, and covered with raised pies and boned game, salmon and chicken mayonnaise, jellies, creams and trifles, whilst fruit and flowers filled every available space. 'I don't believe they have ever seen such a spread in Deepdale before. You will wake to-morrow and find yourself famous.'

'A poor fame, dear Mrs Measures, to have its foundation on truffled turkeys and champagne.'

'Not so, Paula, on the art of being an admirable hostess, and knowing how to make your friends happy. Everybody is delighted and votes your garden-party the most successful they have ever attended. I am afraid there must be some sore and envious hearts in Deepdale this afternoon.'

'I hope not. I think we have asked everybody to whom we owed anything. But they are Hal's friends, of course, and I only followed the list he gave me.'

'Well, it has been very delightful, and I

have enjoyed myself immensely. How many are there present?’

‘I am not quite sure. So many of them have brought friends. I should think about a hundred.’

‘I must not keep you from them longer, Paula. They are beginning to dance again. I believe they will never leave off. And it is growing late—past seven, I declare. I must go and find the vicar. He has to hold a class at eight. Good-bye, my dear, and many congratulations to you.’

Paula echoed the farewell rather languidly. She had been running about all the afternoon and began to feel tired. Yet her face was flushed, and her husband thought he had never seen her look more lovely than she did as she stood by his side and shook hands with her departing guests. At last they were all gone. The dusk was falling, the strains of music had ceased, the quartette were finishing the remains of the truffled turkeys and champagne.

‘Come, my darling,’ said Hal lovingly, as he

wound his arm about his wife's waist, 'you have done your duty bravely, and you are tired out. Come in and take off all your finery, and rest upon the sofa.' And he drew her into the house.

## CHAPTER V.

### A MYSTERIOUS LOSS.

PAULA, following her husband's advice, removed her pretty lace dress and flowery hat, and putting on a dark wrap, lay down on the sofa in the breakfast parlour whilst her servants made her some tea. It was for the first time, then, that Hal perceived a little pile of letters and newspapers waiting for him.

‘By Jove!’ he exclaimed, ‘I have been so busy all day I have had no time to think of my correspondence. However, I suppose they are only circulars. I seldom get anything more interesting.’

He opened one or two county newspapers, and tossed them to one side as he spoke.



‘I suppose our garden-party will get into the *Haltham Chronicle*, Paula. I saw Spring making copious notes. You’ll see your whole bill of fare in print next Saturday.’

Paula smiled faintly, but did not answer. She was lying back on the sofa cushions, with her eyes closed, for now that the excitement and the necessity for exertion were over [she felt how much her head ached. Her husband went on with his letters. He sent a couple of advertisements to join the newspapers, but the contents of the third envelope he opened seemed to arrest his attention. It was a very short letter, but he read it several times over before he ventured furtively to glance at his wife, who was lying in the same position, with closed eyes. After a minute or two, he walked gently up to her side, and kissed her brow. Paula looked up, and lifting her arms, wound them around his neck.

‘Paula, darling,’ he whispered, ‘I have had a letter about your mother. I am afraid she is not well.’

Paula sat up on the sofa, and opened her eyes wide.

‘Not *well*,’ she exclaimed incredulously, ‘mother not well. Why, I heard from her only two days ago, and she did not mention it. What is the matter with her, Hal? Read me her letter.’

‘The letter is not from her, dear. It is from the doctor.’

‘From Dr Gibbon, and he writes to *you*. How strange, when he has known me so long. Well, what does he say? Don’t keep me in suspense.’

‘It is not from Dr Gibbon, dearest. Perhaps he is away for his holiday. It is from some stranger of the name of Courtfield, and all he says is: “Dear sir,—Mrs Sutton is seriously ill, and desires to see Mrs Rushton. Please bring or send her to Grassdene as soon as possible. —Yours faithfully, L. Courtfield.”’

Paula pressed both her hands against her brows.

‘Courtfield, Courtfield,’ she murmured, ‘I do not know the name. Why should he write?’ And then, as though conviction had for the

first time burst upon her, she cried : ‘ Oh, mother, mother. She must be *very* ill, indeed, to let a stranger write to tell us of it. And I have been singing and dancing all the afternoon, whilst she was perhaps *dying*. Oh, what a wicked, wicked girl I am. I have not thought half enough of my poor mother, and all she has done and suffered for me. I have been wrapt up in you, and your love for me, and the pride of my new possessions. Oh, Hal, Hal, is God going to send a judgment upon me?’

‘ For loving me, dearest, and opening your poor parched heart to receive my love? I hope not. He would not be the Father of us all if He grudged His children the only real comfort they have in this world. But Paula, darling, listen to me. There is a train from Haltham at eleven o’clock for the west. I will travel down by it to Grassdene, and send you a wire directly I arrive to let you know how your mother is.’

‘ And leave me here alone, doing nothing!’ she cried. ‘ Oh, no ; that would be worse than

death. I will go with you, Hal. We will go to my dear mother together.'

'Oh, Paula, you are so exhausted with fatigue. A night journey may make you ill. Take my advice, dear one, and go to bed. You can join me by the earliest train to-morrow, if you still desire it.'

'And meanwhile my mother may die without seeing me again. Do you suppose this Courtfield would have said "Come as soon as possible" had there been no danger? Oh, no, Hal; I must go with you. I should kill myself with anxiety and suspense if you left me here alone.'

'If that is your opinion, of course you must come,' replied her husband, 'and I suppose it will be best, as this letter alludes so particularly to you. But we have no time to spare, dearest. It is nearly nine now, and we have an hour's drive before us. Can you be ready so soon.'

'Oh, yes,' she cried, springing from the sofa. 'I require nothing but to change my dress, and

put up the few things I may want for the night. Louisa will do that for me. Oh, my heart is so full of fear and misery. And when I was looking forward so much to seeing her again.'

Hal had no answer to make to this outburst of sorrow. He believed it best to let it have its way. He knew enough of the suddenness with which misfortune overtakes us to fear what might be in store for Paula, and it was as well she should be prepared. So he went in search of Louisa, and told her that her mistress had received unexpected bad news, and had to leave the Hall that night, and she must go and help her to pack up. And in the flurry and distress of departure Paula had only time to instruct her maid to go over to the vicarage the first thing in the morning and tell Mrs Measures she had been called away on account of her mother's illness, and would write to her from Devonshire. She flung on a soft, warm travelling dress, for the nights were beginning to be chilly, and having filled a handbag with

her toilet necessities, was standing ready at the hall door for some time before her husband drove up in his dog-cart.

‘Jump in, dear,’ he said; ‘I ordered the cart instead of the pony chaise because the mare will take us quicker into Haltham. Where is your travelling plaid, and have you no veil? I am so afraid you will take cold in the night air. Wait a moment and I will fetch them for you.’

He wrapped her up tenderly, as if she had been an ailing child, and in the midst of her trouble Paula could not help feeling that as long as she had her husband’s love she could never be entirely miserable. It was a very silent and melancholy journey that followed, for neither of them dared tell their thoughts to the other. Paula sat throughout the night holding Hal’s hand, and staring with sleepless eyes into the darkness, as she wondered vaguely what might be before her. In the early dawn they arrived at Lynmouth, where they had spent their happy honeymoon, and had to wait there

for an hour and a half before getting a train to take them to the nearest station to Grassdene. Hal took Paula to an hotel, and insisted upon her swallowing some coffee, but suspense seemed to make the act almost impossible. At last the moment arrived to start again, and at about seven o'clock in the morning a rickety old fly halted with them before the little home of Mrs Sutton. Paula turned the handle of the vehicle door and hurried up the garden path. Her summons brought a respectable looking woman to the door.

‘How is my mother?’ she asked breathlessly.

The woman scrutinised her keenly.

‘Is it Mrs Rushton?’ she said.

‘Yes, yes. Is Mrs Sutton better? Pray do not keep me in suspense.’

‘If you’re Mrs Rushton, ma’am,’ replied the woman, ‘the doctor’s waiting to see you in the parlour now. He came over early on purpose to meet you on arrival. Here is the lady, sir,’ she continued, throwing open the sitting-room door, through which Paula, closely followed

by her husband, passed. A tall, spare young man was standing to receive them as they entered.

‘Are you the Mr Courtfield who wrote to us?’ cried Paula hastily, for it was no time for ceremony, and she could think of no one but her mother.

‘I am, madam; and I presume I speak to Mrs Rushton?’

‘Yes. How is my mother, and where is Dr Gibbon?’

‘Dr Gibbon is away for a fortnight, and I am acting for him. I was called in to see Mrs Sutton the day before yesterday, and I regret to tell you that she is very ill—very ill, indeed.’

Paula’s large eyes seemed to start out of her white face.

‘Is—there—no hope?’ she said, in a strange husky voice.

The stranger replied gravely,—

‘There *is* no hope, madam, I regret to say. It is better you should know it at once.’



‘Oh, let me go to her. Why am I staying here?’ cried Paula wildly.

She would have left the room, but Mr Courtfield looked significantly at Hal Rushton, who laid a restraining hand upon her.

‘My dearest, stay with us. Don’t you understand?’

‘No! What? What would you say?’

‘That your dear mother is happier than you or I, Paula. That she has gone beyond the reach of sorrow.’

She gazed at him in a vague, wondering manner for a moment, and then, laying her head down on the table, burst into a violent flood of tears.

‘It will do her good,’ said Hal mournfully. ‘She has suspected it from the beginning, though she has not said a word. Poor girl! it has come on her far too suddenly.’

‘I might have told you the worst when I wrote,’ replied Courtfield, ‘for there was no illness. The poor lady was found dead the day before yesterday. I was only called

in to testify to the cause of death, which must have taken place some hours before I saw her.'

'But where, then, was Eliza?' demanded Paula in her surprise, lifting her wet face for the doctor's scrutiny.

'Who is Eliza?' he asked in his turn.

'My mother's servant, who attended on her and the child. She used to come here every day. Why did she not give notice of her illness?'

'My dear lady, you puzzle me. There was no servant in the house when I entered it. Indeed, the person who summoned me—a Mrs Jones—told me expressly that Mrs Sutton was alone. She entered the cottage, I believe, accidentally, and was shocked at what she saw here.'

'*Mrs Jones!*' repeated Paula wonderingly, 'that is the baker's wife. But who was it opened the door to me, then?'

'Oh, that is an hospital nurse of my acquaintance who I took upon myself to send for from

Durnham, as I felt you would not like the body to lie here unwatched.'

'Thank you,' replied Paula, as she commenced to weep afresh; but suddenly she started up again with the question: 'But the child—*where*, then, is the child?'

'*The child!*' echoed Mr Courtfield, in a tone of mystification.

'Yes, my little boy, who lived here with my mother. Where is he? He must be with someone in Grassdene. Eliza must be taking care of him somewhere. Why are they not here to meet me?'

'I am quite unable to answer your questions, Mrs Rushton. I am a stranger in Grassdene, and I never entered this cottage nor saw your poor mother until she was dead. It was Mrs Jones who gave me your name and address. But she said nothing about a child. Perhaps the little boy is with her.'

'Oh, I must see Mrs Jones,' exclaimed Paula impatiently. 'I must hear all she can tell me about this terrible mystery. My mother, ill and

alone. It is too horrible to think of. I shall not be satisfied till I have seen Mrs Jones and Eliza.'

'Mrs Jones I will go and fetch for you at once,' said Mr Courtfield, taking up his hat, 'and doubtless she will tell you where the servant is. If you want anything in my absence, will you call Nurse Moore? You will find her very attentive and kind,' and Mr Courtfield hurried away.

As he disappeared Hal held out both his arms to Paula, and folded her closely to his heart.

'Weep here, my darling,' he said. 'I will give you twice the love I have done hitherto now that you have lost hers.'

'Hal,' she whispered fearfully, '*what* shall we do about the child?'

'Don't worry your dear head about anything more than you can help at present. All will come right in the end, Paula. You will have but to express your wishes for your husband to carry them out to the very best of his ability.'

'Ah, what should I do without you?' she cried,

as she nestled closely to him. 'You are my world.'

But at this juncture in bustled Mrs Jones, with her arms and face a mass of flour, fresh from the baking house.

'Oh, Mrs Rushton,' she exclaimed, 'how glad I am you're come, for I've had such a shock as I thought I could never have got over. Your poor dear ma!'

Paula had known the baker's wife before her first marriage, and consequently had no hesitation in speaking to her of her private affairs.

'Yes, indeed, Mrs Jones, it has been a terrible blow for all of us. But tell me how it happened. I want to know *everything*.'

'Lor', my poor dear, there's nothing to tell, except that the day before yesterday, as 'Liza hadn't been round for the bread in the morning as usual, I thought I'd run in and see if there was any mistake, and when I walked in by the back door, which stood open, and went into the kitchen, you might have knocked me down with a feather, for there sat your poor dear ma,

in all her clothes, stiff and cold. I thought she was sleeping at first, but when I touched her and see her face—there, it almost killed me, too.’

‘Had there been — foul play?’ demanded Paula, with horror-stricken eyes.

‘Oh, no, my dear, ’twas her heart, as the doctor will tell you, and it had been weak for years, as *I* knew well. And she couldn’t have suffered, poor dear lady, for she looked as calm as an infant, just as she looks at this moment, bless her.’

‘But where was Eliza, Mrs Jones? Was *she* not with my poor mother when she was taken ill? Why didn’t she send for the doctor sooner?’

‘My dear lady, no one knows where Eliza is. That is the strange part of it. I see her, as it might be, on the Saturday when she came to our place for two loaves, and it was because she didn’t call on the Monday, nor yet on the Tuesday, that I took the liberty to look in here. But none of us have seen Eliza since, not even her aunt,

so we thought as Master Paulie had gone to you, perhaps—'

'Master Paulie with *me!*' interpolated her listener. 'Who told you that? He has not been with me, Mrs Jones, since my marriage.'

'Why, surely,' cried the baker's wife, ''Liza told me on Saturday as the child was going or had gone (I'm sure I forget which) up to stay with you in Deepdale, and when the girl was missing, and your poor dear ma unable to say nothing to nobody, I made sure 'Liza had gone to take care of him. I was telling her aunt, Mrs Chandler, so only last evening, as we was talking it over, and saying how strange it was as she had never come to say good-bye.'

But here she was interrupted by a loud cry from Paula,—

'But where *is* the child, then? Where is my poor helpless little boy? Oh, God! am I to lose them both in one day?'

Hal Rushton and Mrs Jones both looked aghast. Where could the poor imbecile child be? What mystery was involved in the death

of Mrs Sutton and the disappearance of her unfortunate charge?

‘But the child *must* be somewhere in Grassdene,’ exclaimed Hal. ‘He scarcely left his grandmother’s sight. Some of the villagers must know where he is.’

‘I’m *sure* he’s not in Grassdene,’ returned the baker’s wife, ‘for there isn’t a soul here but what knows the other, and one would have no need to ask twice about it. Besides, haven’t we all known Master Paulie from his birth? And it was so natural to think he’d gone to visit his mother. I’m sure I never doubted it for a moment.’

‘Something terrible must have happened,’ moaned Paula. ‘The boy has fallen over the cliffs, or been brutally murdered, and the shock has killed my poor mother. I feel sure of it. She loved Paulie so dearly. But where is Eliza, who might have solved the mystery? Why has *she* disappeared also? Oh, Hal, the uncertainty and darkness of it all seems the hardest part to bear.’



Hal tried to soothe and reassure his wife, but he had his own suspicions on the subject.

Supposing the poor child had lost his life through the carelessness of the servant, been drowned, perhaps, or allowed to fall over the cliffs, and the shock of hearing the news had killed Mrs Sutton, what more likely than the fear of disclosure and blame had induced Eliza to run away from her native village and seek a situation elsewhere. But this was pure conjecture, and he would not worry his wife by suggesting it. Yet it was very hard to listen to her lamentations and fears and be able to say nothing to comfort her. After a while they went upstairs together hand in hand, and stood with bated breath beside the silent body of the dead. Mrs Sutton, who had once been a very pretty woman, and had possessed an amiable disposition, should have looked very calm and peaceful lying in her shroud. But she did not. There was a strained and anxious look upon her features, which her daughter noticed at once, as a sign that her death had not been a pain-

less one. But Nurse Moore corrected her. It had been ascertained beyond doubt that her decease was due to failure of the action of the heart, and that her spirit had passed away as she sat in an ordinary manner in her arm-chair. But the grieving daughter could not be satisfied. She wept over the marble face of her dead mother until her husband drew her by force from the chamber, and then all her cry was for her lost child. The maternal solicitude which had seemed to slumber in the boy's presence was called to life under the dread that she should never see him again, and she passed the day in wild lamentations over her double loss and futile conjectures as to how one at least of them had been occasioned.

‘Hal,’ she said to her husband, as they sat at night together in the desolate little parlour, ‘did I not tell you, when I first heard of my poor mother’s illness, that God had sent a judgment upon me for being so happy? What right had I to be light-hearted and prosperous, and surrounded by friends, whilst I left my

darling mother to live here alone, and bear all the trouble and anxiety of my ill-fated child? It is as though I had been cowardly enough to run away from the burden I created for myself.'

'Your mother thought differently, Paula. She told me that whenever she looked at poor little Paul she felt she could not blame herself sufficiently for having persuaded you—a child in experience—to marry a man of whom you both knew so little as Captain Bjornsén. I believe it was this feeling of self-reproach which made her so devoted to the child, and so anxious to relieve you of the burden of him.'

'Ah! my mother was an angel,' cried Paula, weeping afresh; 'she loved me too much. My unhappy marriage was the fault of no one except the man who turned it into a hell for me, and made me almost hate the sight of the poor child who reminded me of him. May God forgive me for it. I shall never forgive myself. I was not a mother to Paulie. I

scarcely ever felt as if he belonged to me. And yet, Hal, when he was first born, I was so fond and proud of him. I forgot all my past trouble in the joy of having a baby of my own. When he smiled at me, in a baby's meaningless way, I used to think he knew how miserable I had been, and wanted to console me for it, and dreamed of the time when he would be a strong, kind man, to defend me and take care of me and be the comfort of my life. And then, as time passed on and the smile never seemed to have any more meaning in it, and his eyes, which could see flowers and birds and water, failed to recognise me, and the dreadful truth was broken to me by Dr Gibbon, that my boy was an idiot, my heart seemed to harden against Providence, and instead of pitying the poor little creature, I shrunk from him. *Mother* didn't. My own blessed mother opened her arms to the child whom my cold heart had deserted, and drew him into them. He never gave a proof of his want of intellect but she showered fresh love upon

him, whilst *I* could remember nothing but the cruel blows and curses that made him what he was. And now it is all over. I feel that I am no longer a mother, and I would give the world to bring him back again. My poor, innocent, unoffending child!’

‘Paula, my dearest, you must not despair. We shall find him yet. The boy cannot have been lost in a place like this. Perhaps the girl Eliza, frightened by your mother’s sudden death, ran home with Paulie to her friends.’

‘No! No! She *has* no friends. She is an orphan, and was brought up by her aunt, Mrs Chandler, who complains of not having seen her before she left. Where Eliza may be, I cannot tell, but I am sure that my child is dead. He used to wander about these slopes all by himself looking for wild flowers. He must have fallen over them. His little body is lying somewhere on the beach, smashed to pieces. I feel it. I know it. I shall see it lying so all my life. Oh, Hal, this will kill

me. I cannot remain on earth when those two have gone to Heaven.'

'But, Paula, if there is any foundation for your fears, you shall, at least, not remain in this torturing uncertainty,' said Hal. 'To-morrow I will engage men to search the whole of the coast for ten miles round, to see if they can find any traces of such a catastrophe. If they fail to do so, I hope you will be satisfied that you are mistaken.'

'But if he has not fallen over the cliffs, he may have been drowned in the sea. Oh, Hal, I am certain he has come by a violent death, and the shock killed my dear mother. Why else should she have that strained and pained look on her dead features. Nurse Moore says she can have suffered no physical pain, but she experienced some awful shock or fright, I am sure of that. All the rest of my life I shall be haunted by that look. It is as if she had died longing to tell *me* something that would affect my peace of mind. And what could that be but the death of my poor child. Oh, God! if

I might but have seen and spoken to her, if only for ten minutes, before you took her away from me for ever.'

'Paula, my darling, I know what you must be suffering under this harrowing suspense, but don't lose heart until we have seen Eliza. We *must* be able to trace Eliza. A girl like that could not have possessed the means to go very far. If she has been frightened away by your mother's death, she is sure to come back after a while. Hunger alone will compel her to do so. Mr Courtfield told me that your old friend Dr Gibbon is expected back to-morrow. Try and be patient till you have seen him. He may be able to throw light upon the subject. For my sake, Paula, for *my* sake, don't make yourself ill with the violence of your grief.'

But though Paula did not reject her husband's tenderness, it only seemed to make her tears flow faster, until she wept herself to sleep, from sheer exhaustion, in his arms.

The next day brought home Dr Gibbon, but he could give them no relief. He was very

much shocked to hear of his old friend's sudden death (although he had known what she suffered from for years past), but he could tell them nothing about little Paul, whose disappearance, with that of the servant girl, was as mysterious to him as to everyone else. The last time he had seen the child and his grandmother they had both been in their usual health and spirits, and he had a toy in his portmanteau which he had brought back for the little boy. He visited every house in the village, questioning as he went, but not a soul appeared to have heard or seen anything to point to the occurrence of an accident. The person who could be traced as the very last to have seen or spoken with Paulie was a little girl called Becky Silver, who affirmed she had met him and Eliza on Tuesday morning whilst they were talking to a man.

‘Who was the man?’ demanded Dr Gibbon.

‘I don’t know, sir. I never see’d ’im before. I’m thinking he was a tramp. He was very dusty, and ’is ’at was broken.’



‘Was he young or old?’

‘I don’t know, sir. I couldn’t see ’is face. They was on the other side the ’edge. I think the man was begging or summat. I ’eard ’Liza talking to ’im, but Paulie ’e never say nothing.’

‘Where did they go?’

‘They didn’t go nowheres, sir. They stood still on t’other side the ’edge.’

‘Did Eliza seem friendly with this man?’

‘No, sir. She didn’t seem nothink. She was settling Paulie’s pinafore.’

‘Why didn’t you speak to them, Becky?’

‘Oh, I never do, sir. I can’t a-bear ’Liza, and Paulie he’s got no sense. I didn’t even nod to ’em. I just walked on and said nothink.’

‘This witness can evidently throw no light upon the mystery,’ said Dr Gibbon to Hal Rushton; ‘but I don’t like the idea of the tramp. And yet, what would a tramp get by carrying off or murdering this poor little child? He did not belong to rich people. The clothes

on his back would not have fetched five shillings.'

'And yet murder has been committed for less,' remarked Hal.

'You are right, sir, but not in open daylight and in the presence of a witness. It's the girl's disappearance that puzzles me. What has *she* gone away for? It is incomprehensible.'

'My wife will insist that some accident must have happened to the child through the carelessness of the servant, and that when she found the announcement caused her mistress's death she was so terrified that she ran away.'

'It would be an excellent surmise if an accident *had* happened, but how could a child fall over these cliffs without all the village knowing it? The population lives by fishing. The beach is seldom without men and women on it.'

'So *I* say, but to satisfy Paula I have engaged a dozen fishermen who know the coast to search it in every possible place. The cer-

tainty of the poor child's death would be better than this cruel suspense. I feel, if it goes on, that it will kill her.'

'No, no; she will get over it. It is doubly hard coming at the same time as her mother's death, but the boy could never have been anything but a trouble to her, and when time has convinced her that he is gone for ever, she will find it a relief. And let us hope she may in due time have other children to make her entirely forget her unfortunate firstborn.'

'God grant it,' said Hal Rushton reverently.

But though every trouble was taken, and no money was spared, not a trace could be found of the missing child or servant girl, and inquiries at the nearest station proved of no avail. No such man as Becky Silver had described had been known to alight at or depart from the platform, and the only thing left to be done was to place descriptions of the missing persons in the hands of the police. After which the whole agitation seemed to go to sleep for ever. Meantime, Mrs Sutton's funeral took place, and

Hal Rushton and Dr Gibbon were the only mourners who followed to see her laid to rest in the little graveyard beside the hill, whilst Paula sat at home like a statue, stupefied with grief. She had left off accusing herself of being the murderer of her mother and the destroyer of her child, but one could plainly see that she still believed it.

The mother's love, that had slept so long, had wakened with tenfold force, and no woman who has loved and lost her baby could ever suffer as Paula suffered at the hands of her accusing conscience. Even when Hal, in his great love and pity for her, timidly suggested what Dr Gibbon had alluded to, and told her he should pray that God would send another child to comfort and console her, she turned round upon him in a manner she had never done before, and declared she wanted no more children ; that nothing and no one could make up to her for the loss of Paulie ; and that she should weep for him to the end of her days.

And so her husband took her back to High-

bridge Hall, still miserable and dejected, and with the terrible doubt about her child to make matters worse, and a great dread of meeting any of her friends or neighbours again.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE WIDOW'S STRATAGEM.

IT was about a week after the young Rushtons' return to Deepdale, and the widow and her son were seated at tea together in the parlour of Wavertree Cottage, when they perceived Sarah Brennan at the garden gate. The table was in much the same condition as it used to be at Highbridge Hall before Paula was installed as mistress there. An iron tray, without a cloth, held the teapot and cups and saucers, whilst the bread, bearing greasy marks of butter over it, and the butter plentifully besprinkled with bread crumbs, were set upon the red worsted tablecloth, after the fashion of the lower classes. There was no stint, however, though plenty of

vulgarity. Eggs and cream from the Highbridge dairy, and home-made preserves from the Highbridge storeroom—part of the spoils carried away after the domestic siege—were engaging the attention of Mrs Rushton and her son, when they perceived Lady Bristowe's companion wrestling with the latch of the gate.

‘Why, lor’, if there ain’t that woman Brennan,’ cried the widow, with her mouth full. ‘What on hearth can she want with us? I’m sure I’ve never given her any encouragement, but I s’pose we must hoffer her a dish of tea.’

‘That won’t ’arm us,’ rejoined Ted Snaley. ‘But look ’ere, mother, don’t you be a-giving yerself away, at the same time, as you did to Ellen Foster yesterday arternoon. You told ’er a deal too much. Wot’s the good of letting all Deepdale know as we’re not intimate at the ’All? Don’t you s’pose it’ll go round the place? Don’t we ’ope to be so, and *mean* to be so, into the bargain? But I’m always a-telling you you must work more dark. Pretend as we knows everything, and are always there, and then it’ll

come quite natural when we are. Do you understand me now?’

‘Lor’, yes, Ted. But do go and ’elp that poor creature, for she don’t seem to know where the latch is.’

‘All right. But, remember, if she tells you anything you don’t know you’re to look as if you did.’

‘I won’t forget, Teddy. You’re a sharp ’un, to be sure,’ replied the widow, chuckling over his advice.

In another minute Miss Sarah Brennan had found her way into the room.

‘Good-evening,’ ejaculated her hostess; ‘this is a honner, to be sure. I ’ope I see you well, miss, and hall the Habbey party. How do her ladyship like this change? Quite chilly, ain’t it? We shall have winter ’ere before we knows it. You’ll ’ave a cup of tea?’

‘Thank you, Mrs Rushton, I shall be obliged,’ returned Miss Brennan, ‘for I’ve been on my feet all the afternoon. Her ladyship has driven over to see Lord and Lady Warden, and dropt



me in Deepdale on her way, and I'm going to walk back to the Abbey this evening. We drove first to the Hall to inquire after Mrs Hal Rushton, but she wouldn't see us, and we could hear no particulars whatever. Lady Bristowe was sadly vexed. She has taken such an interest in Mrs Rushton she quite thought *she* would be admitted, whoever was denied. I could see it ruffled her. So I thought I would walk over here before I went home and learn if you could give me a little information about the matter.'

The widow had just began to say 'Lor', my dear, I don't know no more than you do,' when a violent kick under the table from Mr Snaley's hobnailed boots recalled her to her senses.

'Lor', my dear,' she said instead, 'I don't know as I can tell you anything satisfactory. It's a family matter, you see, that only concerns ourselves. My poor daughter-in-law has lost her poor mother very suddent like, and it's so upset 'er, as well it may, that she feels as if

she couldn't a-bear to see no one but Ted and me.'

'And Mr Rushton, I suppose?' said Miss Brennan, as she sipped her tea.

'Oh, 'Al, of course. He don't count. He's the same to 'er as me and my boy there. But she's very much shook and upset, and quite ill, as you may say, and confined to her room.'

'But how did it all happen, Mrs Rushton? *That* is what her ladyship wants to know. The gentleman was out when we called to-day, and the servant knew nothing except that Mrs Hal Rushton had lost her mamma very suddenly, and had seen no one since she came home but Mrs Measures.'

'And me and mother. The first person she called out for was mother,' interpolated Ted.

'In course,' said Mrs Rushton, 'and what more nateral, poor dear.'

'You can tell me, then, how it was that Mrs Sutton died? Her ladyship 'is anxious to hear all the particulars.'

‘Mrs ’oo?’ cried the widow.

‘Mrs Sutton, Mrs Rushton’s mother. Ah! I know she called herself “Stafford” whilst she was teaching at the schoolhouse, but she told Lady Bristowe that she only did that to save her family name.’

‘Oh, yes, in course,’ repeated the widow, who had got so out of her depth that her tea and bread-and-butter effected a collision that caused her to choke and splutter for the next five minutes. ‘And so Mrs ’Al told her ladyship that. Well, I didn’t think she’d let it out of the family, but there’s no ’arm done, arter all, and she can please ’erself. And what more is it you wants to know, miss?’

‘What did Mrs Sutton die of? Was it heart complaint?’

‘Yes, miss, it were. She was always complaining of it, poor dear, for years past, and it took her off suddent at the last, as it always do. There ain’t much to tell beside that. Mrs ’Al ’eard the noos the evening she give the “feet” at the ’All. Me and Ted, we wasn’t

there, as perhaps you've 'eard, miss. My son and daughter, of course, they was most pressing as we should go, but I had an 'orful attack of tic-doloureux, and Ted 'e's that dootiful 'e wouldn't leave me. 'Al, 'e says, "Whatever shall we do without you, mother?" 'e says; but there, miss, you can understand it must be painful for me to attend any merrymaking in the 'ouse where my dear good 'usband lived and died.'

'Oh, yes, I can quite understand it,' replied Miss Brennan; 'and then your daughter-in-law didn't behave quite nicely to you or anyone while she was at the schoolhouse, did she? Of course, I don't mean anything wrong, but we heard of it over at the Abbey, at least I did, and so did our curate, Mr Vernon.'

Mrs Rushton was just about to launch forth on her beloved scandal when another kick from Ted caused her to wince with pain.

'Lor', Ted,' she exclaimed rather testily, 'I wish you'd keep your feet t'other side the table. You always was fine in the feet from a boy.'

You're quite mistook, Miss Brennan, as everybody helse was about the school'ouse,' she continued to her guest. 'It was a mistake from beginning to end, as even our vicar Mr Measures 'ad to acknowledge. Why, she stayed in the vicarage first of all, and 'er ladyship called on 'er there. You must have 'eard that as well?'

'Oh, yes, ma'am. I've heard pretty well *everything*,' rejoined Miss Brennan; 'but her ladyship having, as you may say, taken up Mr and Mrs Hal Rushton, and shown a good deal of sympathy about Mrs Sutton's state of health, is naturally hurt at being kept in the dark about her death, as she quite expected to be the first to hear all the particulars.'

'But there ain't nothing to tell,' replied Mrs Rushton. 'As soon as Mrs 'Al 'eard 'er mother was ill she went down with 'er 'usband to Devonshire, but the poor lady was gone before they got there. And when the burial was over they come 'ome. And it shook the poor girl up considerably, as it would do to hanyone with a 'eart.'

‘And was Mrs Sutton buried at—at—I forget the name of the place where she lived,’ said Sarah Brennan inquisitively.

The widow, who had never heard it, was nonplussed.

‘No, she wasn’t’ she answered stoutly; ‘the body was taken away to be buried in the family vault in London.’

‘Bravo, mother!’ cried Ted Snaley, clapping her on the back when Miss Brennan, finding she could extract no further information, had disappeared, ‘you did famously. Blest if I couldn’t ’ave roared aloud when you come out with the family vault. Don’t you see how much better it is not to let out as we’re all at logger-heads?’

‘Yes. But I say, Ted, there’s summat fishy about Mrs ’Al. I always said so, and I’m sure on it. Now, why did she give a false name when she come here?’

‘That’s jest what I want you to find out, but you won’t do it by sticking at Wavertree Cottage. I bet there’s lots be’ind that no one knows

but' erself. Things, p'r'aps, as would make 'Al kick 'er out from the 'All like a dog. Think of that. And you're just the woman to worm 'em out of 'er.'

'Aye, if she'd take a little more kindly to me. But she 'as sich a stand off manner with 'er.'

'So she 'ad when things were all right, but this here is jest your time. From what I 'ear, she's regular down in 'er luck. Charlotte the dairymaid told me yesterday that she's quite ill with frettin', and she won't see no one. Mrs Measures was in her room for ten minutes when she first come 'ome, and that's all. She's refused herself to heverybody, and don't seem to 'ave no 'eart even to order dinner, nor to go hout nor hin, but sits all day in 'er own room crying.'

'But if she won't see no one, Ted, what's the use of my trying.'

'Well, you must go to 'er as a nuss, and not as a visitor. Make some of your beef jelly, or other nostrums, and take it up in your 'and.

And if she won't see you the first day, go the second, and the third, until she *do* see you. You can do it if you choose, mother. And now that the shooting season's on, 'Al's out all day almost, and you will be able to get at 'er alone. Make yourself useful to 'er. Order the dinners, and look after the 'ousekeeping, and see if you can't get back some of your old hinfluence at the 'All.'

'You're a *very* clever lad, Ted,' exclaimed his mother, as she regarded his ugly face and ungainly figure with fond admiration.

'Well, I can see through a brick wall as far as any, I s'pose,' rejoined her amiable offspring, 'and I am sure if you wants to get any hinfluence hover that young person, you must do it by fair means and not by foul. Don't you remember what a fuss she made over that there pin-cushion you took to 'er when we went to the 'All?'

'Yes, and it was you as told me to take it, too. Well, Ted, I'll foller your advice again, my lad, and set about making some of my beef



jelly. It'll set beautiful this cool weather. And I'll make a junket as well. Grapes and game and all sorts they 'ave at the 'All, but they 'aven't an 'and like mine to turn out jellies and junkets.'

Accordingly, the very next day saw Mrs Rushton taking her way to Highbridge Hall, carrying a basket carefully covered with a white cloth. She did not ask for admittance. She walked straight into the house, through the kitchen premises, and Hal being after the pheasants and partridges, there was no one in authority to bar the way. The servants had no right to deny her ingress, and they would not have dreamt of doing so, considering the position she had so lately held there. She merely asked for dishes on which to pile her dainties, and inquired in which room Mrs Hal Rushton was to be found.

'I think the mistress is in her boo-daw,' replied the housemaid, 'but I'm afraid you won't get in, mum. She won't open the door for nobody.'

‘Oh, I’m sure she will open it for *me*,’ said the widow, as she arranged her offerings upon a tray.

‘She haven’t eaten enough to feed a fly since she come ’ome,’ remarked the cook.

‘That’s why I’ve brought ’er some of my sickroom jelly,’ returned Mrs Rushton. ‘You mustn’t be offended, cook, but I’ve sick-nussed for thirty year, and should know summat about it by this time.’

‘Oh, no offence, Mrs Rushton, mum,’ cried the cook. ‘I should have thought a nice solid bit o’ beef would ’ave done the missus more good, but there’s no sayin’. Some relishes one thing and some another, and so long as you eat it don’t much signify what it is,’ and so the widow was allowed to carry her tray upstairs without molestation.

Poor Paula was indeed very much in need of comfort. She had cried herself nearly blind, but her tears had brought her no relief. She could think, indeed, of her poor mother as safe and happy in Heaven, but her heart was sick

and heavy with fears for Paul. Where was he? What was he doing? Was he alive and suffering, or dead and at rest? These thoughts tortured her day and night, and she felt as if they would never be satisfied. She shrunk from seeing any of her friends or acquaintances. She could not speak of her mother yet. The wound had been too recently inflicted, and she feared lest in her agony of doubt she might blurt out something about Paul. Her husband was everything that was good and kind to her, and if love could have cured her pain, it would have already disappeared, but he could do nothing to mitigate the tortures of suspense and remorse which she was suffering. And so she had prayed him to leave her, had even summoned up the ghost of a smile with which to send him on his way, and tried hard, as soon as he was gone, to reduce the chaos of her mind to some sort of order, and force herself to attend to her household duties. But anyone who has tried it knows how very difficult that is whilst the heart is bowed down with grief and the

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mind distracted with anxiety. The petty details of choice and expenditure jar so terribly by contrast with the bigness of one's sorrow, and it hurts one's pride to break down before one's inferiors. Paula was feeling all this as she lay face downwards on the sofa in her boudoir and heard a low tap at the door.

'It's all right, cook,' she answered fretfully. 'There's no hurry. Mr Rushton will not be home till seven. I will send down my orders as soon as I have thought of something.'

But a voice answered,—

'It ain't the cook, my dear. It's jest me as has took the liberty to bring you a little jelly of my own making,' and without waiting for permission Mrs Rushton opened the door and entered the room.

Paula sat up on the sofa and regarded her wonderingly. She could not believe at first *who* had invaded her privacy, and to do the widow justice she was honestly shocked by the young wife's appearance. Paula's complexion was white and sodden from lengthened weep-

ing. Her hair was untidily twisted round her head, and she wore a dress of black crape cloth, without the slightest relief, which added to the pallor of her countenance. She looked wonderfully altered, indeed, from the handsome young woman who had received her friends so short a time ago at the garden-party. All her beauty seemed to have vanished in an hour. Mrs Rushton could not restrain her surprise.

‘Oh, lor’, my dear,’ she exclaimed, ‘you *do* look bad. Why, whatever ’ave you been a-doing to yourself?’

‘I cannot see any visitors. Indeed, I am not fit for it,’ said Paula faintly. ‘I am sorry, Mrs Rushton, but I must ask you to excuse me.’

‘Well, well, I ain’t a visitor—I’m only a sick-nuss, and you’ve no call even to speak to me,’ replied the widow, as she placed her tray upon the table. ‘But it won’t do for you to go without nourishment for so long, and so I ’ave made bold to bring you a little beef jelly and a Devonshire junket. And a glass of sherry wine, too. That won’t do you no ’arm.’

‘But I cannot—’ commenced Paula.

‘Oh, yes, you can. You’ve no need to worry over them, but jest leave ’em there, and put a spoonful to your lips as you feel inclined. You mustn’t go too long, you know—not for ’Al’s sake, nor yet your own. And though ’e never *did* like me, my dear, on accounts of my marrying his father, I’ve lost my own poor mother, you see, at eighty-nine, and I feels for you.’

Paula laid her head down upon the sofa again, and concealed her face from view.

‘Now, I’m not going to talk of it, my dear. I know my place too well for that. I know that though my poor dear good ’usband made me mistress of all ’e ’ad, I’m not a lady born, and Mr ’Al need never think as I’d presume on the past now that heverythink is haltered. But ’aving kep ’ouse for ’im for so many years, and knowing well what a ’ardship it is to look after dinners and sichlike for a young person in your circumstances, I thought I’d come up and see if I could be of hany use to you with the servants—not to hintrude, you hunderstand,

but to save you the trouble of thinking at such a time.'

'Mrs Rushton,' said Paula, raising her head again, 'I think it is very kind of you to have thought of it—very, *very* kind. I don't seem as if I *could* think even of such trifles. My head aches so — and — and — everything upsets me.'

'Yes, yes, *I* know,' replied the widow soothingly, 'and I didn't ought to be here, but I wanted to bring you up the jelly and junket myself, and I'm going immediate. Well, now, don't you trouble to think of nothink. I'll order the dinners and breakfasts and heverythink if it'll save you a-doing of it. And to-morrow I'll come back and do the same. And don't let Mr 'Al worrit hisself, thinking as he'll see me. I've come up to try and save *you*, my poor dear, and I'll keep out of sight, never you fear.'

'Don't say that,' urged Paula; 'you are doing me a great kindness. I wanted a little help so much just now, and Hal will be the first to

acknowledge it. But I am really not fit to talk.'

'In course not. I know what you're feeling, jest as if it was myself. And so now I'll go and see as Mr 'Al 'as heverythink comfortable against 'e comes 'ome. But won't you take jest *one* teaspoonful of jelly afore I goes?' said Mrs Rushton coaxingly.

'To please *you*, I will,' replied Paula.

She swallowed two or three spoonfuls, and half a glass of wine, and Mrs Rushton descended to the kitchen quarters convinced that her victory was won. There she told the servants, much to their dissatisfaction, that their mistress had deputed her to issue the necessary household orders, and there she remained till she had seen the seven o'clock dinner, to which Hal sat down alone, properly dished and served, when she resumed her walking attire and walked back to Wavertree Cottage to receive the congratulations of her son. Hal Rushton was the least satisfied of all at the new arrangement. He returned home from



shooting as the afternoon drew in, and sat down rather sad and disappointed to a lonely dinner. Paula declared herself to be still too ill or too miserable to come downstairs, and the young husband could not help comparing the depressing influence of the present with the happy remembrance of the past. How long, he wondered, as he descended to the dining-room, would his comfort be sacrificed to his wife's grief for her mother and her child. But a charming little dinner awaited him. He had been forced to put up with anything the country cook chose to give him since his return home, but this evening she had apparently excelled herself. A dish of dainty cutlets, a roast partridge, and some of his favourite pancakes, soon put Hal into a better humour, for the very best of men are influenced by their dinner, and after a glass or two of Burgundy he felt happy and hopeful again.

‘My compliments to the cook,’ he said gaily, as he got up from the table, ‘and tell her that’s the best dinner she’s given me this week, and

now that she has got into the straight path, I hope she'll keep to it. Has your mistress taken anything to-day?'

'Only a little jelly and beef-tea, sir,' replied the parlour-maid.

'Well, send the tea up to her room, and tell cook to let us have something nice with it—buttered toast or cakes. Perhaps Mrs Rushton will fancy them.' And he ran up, two steps at a time, into Paula's presence.

She was sitting up now, gazing with grief-stricken eyes upon the fast gathering shadows that were settling down upon the lawn and surrounding foliage and leaving the little room in darkness.

Hal sat down on the sofa beside her, and threw his arms about her waist.

'My darling,' he exclaimed fondly, 'why do you sit in the dark? It is so gloomy.'

'It suits me all the better, Hal. I am gloomy, too.'

But you mustn't give way to it, Paula. You must try to look upon the brighter side of things.'

‘What brighter side is there for me? Oh, this terrible uncertainty,’ pressing her hands against her heart, ‘it is killing me.’

‘No, dearest, for my sake, do not say anything so cruel. Try to believe it is a certainty, Paula. You know how careful Dr Gibbon and I were to leave no stone unturned to ascertain the truth, and that the case is now in the hands of the sharpest detectives in London, so that if there is anything further to learn about it we shall, without doubt, receive the information.’

‘And meanwhile, Hal—’ replied Paula in a voice of pain.

‘Meanwhile, darling, however hard the suspense is to bear, you only share it with all those who have lost friends at sea or by any other mysterious accident. Hundreds of mourners receive no certain assurance of their loss, except such as time and silence bring them. Not that I would depreciate the pain, my dearest, only it grieves me so to see you looking so pale and unhappy. What have you eaten to-day?’

‘Oh, plenty,’ said Paula listlessly. ‘The servants have sent me up something almost every hour.’

‘*I* have had a capital dinner,’ continued Hal briskly; ‘all my favourite dishes. I sent out my compliments to cook in return for it, but I fancy they are due *here* instead, and that my dear girl has been trying to combat her own feelings for the sake of her unworthy husband’s comfort. I only wish you had enlivened the meal with your presence, dear. Then it would have been perfect.’

‘*I* didn’t order it,’ replied Paula, in the same languid voice. ‘I can’t think of anything now. My head throbs so. It was Mrs Rushton.’

‘*Mrs Rushton!*’ repeated Hal, with a frown.

‘Yes. She came up here this morning to know if she could be of any use to me with the housekeeping, and I was only too thankful to let her do it. She brought me some jelly and junket she had made herself. I am sure she means to be kind.’

‘Perhaps,’ replied Hal, in an altered tone,

‘but the question is, *to whom?* I am sorry you encouraged her, Paula. I would rather have dined off cook’s hashed mutton by far.’

‘Well, I am not fit to do anything at present, and no one else has offered to help me.’

‘Mrs Measures is only too anxious to be with you, and is a far better companion for you than Mrs Rushton.’

‘How could I ask Mrs Measures to come here and order the dinner, and look after the servants, when she has her own house to superintend?’ said Paula fretfully. ‘Besides, Mrs Rushton didn’t offer herself as a companion. She only proposed to save me the household drudgery that I feel at present utterly unfit for. I think you are very hard upon her, Hal. She can’t help having been born in an inferior position to your own.’

‘And I have never blamed her for it,’ replied her husband; ‘but I know her better than you do. I made a vow when she left the Hall that she should never re-enter it. However, if she is of any assistance to you—’

‘Of course she is an assistance to me, and more so than any stranger could be, because she is familiar with all your likes and dislikes.’

‘She certainly managed to send up a dinner to my taste to-day, and it is all the more surprising because when she lived here, with that detestable son of hers, I never had anything fit to eat. Pray is she hanging about the house now?’

‘Oh, no, I suppose not. I conclude when she had arranged the meals that she went home. But she said she should come again to-morrow.’

Hal gave a kind of mock groan.

‘I hope the elegant Ted is not a necessary part of the invasion,’ he said.

Paula began to cry. She was so weakened she was quite unfit to bear the least raillery or opposition.

‘Why should he be?’ she exclaimed. ‘Why do you hint at such a thing? If you don’t wish me to have any help or assistance, now that I am

so broken down I am unfit for anything, go and tell Mrs Rushton not to come here again, and I will try and struggle on as best I can alone. But oh, Hal,' she continued, amidst gasping sobs, 'if I cannot have rest and peace and quiet whilst my brain seems as if it were on fire, I shall go mad—I shall go mad, I know I shall—or I shall die.'

She flung herself, in utter abandonment, upon the sofa as she concluded, and there was nothing left for Hal to do but to soothe her. He hated the very names of the widow and her son, but he loved his wife from the bottom of his heart, and felt for her bereavement as deeply as it was possible for him to do. He threw his arms about her slender form, and pressed his lips upon the long fair hair that streamed over her shoulders, and assured her a dozen times that she should never hear him breathe another word against any arrangement that tended to her comfort. He would welcome anyone who relieved her of the duties she felt unequal to perform, and if the Hall had become distasteful to her he would take

her away at once—to the seaside, or on the continent, anywhere—so long as it brought peace and distraction to her overwrought nerves. Paula lay and listened to him almost as if she were in a dream, until a sense of the self-sacrifice he was proposing smote upon her understanding.

‘But to go away *now*,’ she said at length, in a tone of wonder, ‘when the shooting season is at its height, and hunting is just about to begin. If you were to take me away from Deepdale now, you would lose your whole year’s pleasure, Hal.’

‘And do you think that fact would influence me for one moment against the thought of doing you good, Paula? How little you must think of my love for you. Why, dearest, I would give up hunting and shooting and every pursuit I like best, not only for a season but a lifetime, to bring back the flush of health to your face and the light of happiness to your eyes. You don’t realise how I love you, Paula.’



‘You are too good—too good,’ she murmured, as she seized his hand and kissed it. ‘But oh, my poor mother—my poor child! Oh, Hal, do you think I shall ever know for *certain* what has become of Paulie?’

‘I am *sure* of it,’ he replied, with a feigned assurance which he did not feel. ‘It is impossible but that such means as we have employed must sooner or later prove successful. Only, my love must try and have patience. And now, what is it to be? Will you come away with me somewhere?’

‘No, no, Hal; let me stay here—*here*, where the news will reach me soonest. I am quite content—indeed I am. Only, let me see no one and hear no one unless I choose, and by-and-by this cloud will pass away, and I shall be myself again.’

Hal Rushton sighed, but did not answer. *He* thought silence and solitude the worst things possible for her, but the medical men had told him to let her have her own way, and he feared to disobey them. So the days and weeks

and months passed on, and very few people in Deepdale saw anything of young Mrs Rushton, whilst the widow had quite re-established herself as housekeeper at Highbridge Hall.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE SCANDAL SPREADS.

OF all Paula's acquaintances, Lady Bristowe was the most indignant at the turn affairs had taken. She had quite expected that the sudden devotion she had conceived for the young wife was reciprocal, and that she would be the first if not the only person admitted to weep over her trouble with her, and carry the interesting details far and wide. And when she found that day after day she received the same message, that Mrs Hal Rushton was not well enough to see anybody, she became affronted (as foolish people are apt to be), and from having been Paula's warmest partisan became ready to cavil at her actions before

anyone. The insult (as Lady Bristowe considered it) was greatly aggravated one day when, as her carriage stood before the Hall door and she received the same answer to her inquiries, the shabby figure of the Widow Rushton was seen to walk up the drive and enter the charmed portals without a question.

‘Who is that person in black?’ demanded her ladyship, with vulgar curiosity.

The servant hesitated a moment.

‘*That*, your ladyship? Oh, *that’s* Mrs Rushton as was—the old lady, your ladyship—the old gentleman’s widow.’

‘And what is *she* doing here? I thought Mrs Hal Rushton didn’t notice her,’ continued Lady Bristowe.

‘Oh, yes, my lady. She’s here every day almost. She does all the housekeeping since the mistress has been so poorly, and sees after the master’s dinners.’

‘And does your mistress see *her*?’

‘Sometimes, my lady. Mrs Rushton nurses the mistress, like, and takes her trays up to

her room. But she don't eat nothing to speak of.'

'And your mistress can't see *me* ?'

'She sent her kind regards, if you please, my lady, and she ain't well enough to see no one yet.'

'Very good. Palmer' (this to the coachman),  
'drive home.'

And Lady Bristowe sank back on her seat, very red and indignant, and highly offended, and from that day was quite ready to discuss Paula's behaviour from the worse point of view.

'But you must not forget,' said Mr Vernon, when she laid her complaint before him, 'that Mrs Rushton has not been brought up in the same sphere of life as yourself, and is probably ignorant that she is guilty of a breach of manners in excluding you when she admits so undesirable a person as old Farmer Rushton's widow.'

'Oh, that's only an excuse, Mr Vernon, because the girl's young and pretty. Isn't she

the daughter of an officer in the Royal Navy? Where could she have learned better manners than in the service?’

‘Perhaps so—had she enjoyed the advantages of it. But, you know, she was only the village school teacher of Deepdale, and not quite blameless even in that lowly department. For my part, I was quite astonished to find her as ladylike as she is.’

‘She told us why she turned teacher—to assist her mother, the person who is dead. But what do you mean by saying she was not “quite blameless,” Mr Vernon?’

The curate looked distressed.

‘Surely you must have heard of it. I wouldn’t have mentioned it had I thought otherwise. But—so intimate as you are with the Measures—’

‘Why, it was the Measures who introduced this girl to me.’

‘Just so; and therefore the little scandal (whatever it was) is not worth repeating, since you may be sure, had *they* believed it, they would

never have continued to honour Mrs Rushton with their acquaintance.'

'But what was it? If the Measures could bear it with impunity, so can I.'

But is it kind or wise to spread such tales? They are like the grain of mustard seed that grows up in a night. They are far better forgotten.'

'Not if there is no truth in them. Since you have said so much, Mr Vernon, I must insist on your finishing the story.'

'I wish I had never commenced it; but I made sure you had already been told. It was an ill-natured report set abroad, I believe, by the churchwarden, Mr Gribble.'

'I know Mr Gribble. We have our straw, I think, from him. What did he say about Mrs Rushton?'

'I really can hardly remember,' replied the curate, who was sincerely repenting his rash allusion; 'but I know it was made the subject of a clerical inquiry, from which the young lady emerged, it must be presumed, with flying

colours, since Mr and Mrs Measures still visit her.'

'But you said she had not been "quite blameless,"' persisted Lady Bristowe, who scented a scandal.

'I am vexed with myself for using such an expression, Lady Bristowe. It was not fair to your young friend.'

'Oh, don't call her by that name, Mr Vernon. She has behaved so curiously, not to say ungratefully, to me lately, that I really cannot look upon myself any longer as her friend.'

'I am sorry for that. I think you should (as I said before) make allowances for her. I think, myself, she was too young and refined for the position of a school teacher. The churchwardens expected her to behave as a servant, whereas she took upon herself the liberties of a gentlewoman.'

'In what way?'

'By receiving her friends in the schoolhouse after hours.'



‘*Men* friends?’ said her ladyship sharply.

‘I don’t know—I am not quite sure—I am really not competent to give an opinion,’ stammered the curate. ‘I think, if you wish to hear the story, you had better apply to Mrs Measures, Lady Bristowe, who is sure to know the truth.’

‘Oh, it’s not of much interest to *me*,’ cried her ladyship, tossing her head, and getting very red in the face. ‘The young woman is hardly likely to come to Tor Abbey again after the heartless manner in which she has treated me. She has been home for nearly six weeks, Mr Vernon, and hardly a day has passed without my going or sending to inquire after her health, and asking if I could be of any service to her, and I have received nothing in return but the coldest and most consistent refusal — always the same message, that she is too ill to see anyone. And yet, when I was there yesterday afternoon, I saw that low, ignorant woman Mrs Rushton, I mean the old farmer’s widow, who, I have understood, the young people would have nothing to do with, walk into the house

as if it belonged to her, and the servant told me she was there every day in attendance on her mistress. It's not very likely after *that*, Mr Vernon, that I shall waste any more of my time or attention on Mrs Hal Rushton.'

'And yet,' remarked the curate, 'though the widow is, as you say, an illiterate and low-born person, she was, after all, the late Mr Rushton's wife, and no one could blame his son for acknowledging it.'

'Oh, dear, no. Certainly not,' exclaimed Lady Bristowe sarcastically; 'but if that sort of company is good enough for Mrs Hal Rushton, *mine* is decidedly too good.'

'I can hardly imagine that fair, delicate looking girl enjoying the companionship of Mrs Rushton, senior,' said Mr Vernon; 'but perhaps she permits it in deference to her husband's wishes.'

'No such thing, Mr Vernon. The husband hates the old woman and her son. Mrs Measures has told me so far. Depend upon it, the ladies are congenial to each other, and perhaps, after

all, her story about belonging to the Royal Navy may be a subterfuge, and their stations in life not so dissimilar.'

'But I thought you had found the name and services of young Mrs Rushton's father recorded in the *Navy List*, Lady Bristowe?'

'But how am I to know the girl gave me her right name? She passed under another at the schoolhouse, you must remember. Indeed, I think Mrs Measures was very wrong to introduce her into society without knowing more about her. *My* idea is that she will turn out to be a regular impostor.'

'Come, come, your ladyship is going a little too far. From what I hear, this poor girl seems to have experienced a terrible shock from the sudden death of her mother, and is really ill. Dr Minton was very anxious about her a week ago. When she recovers her mental equilibrium, everything will be right again,'

'Not with *me*, Mr Vernon. I am not the sort of person to chop and change with every passing wind. I am only sorry I ever gave

her one of my matchless Blenheims. I little thought at the time that it would be subjected to the companionship of a herdsman's widow.'

'Well, the dog, at least, will not suffer from the contact,' exclaimed Mr Vernon, laughing. 'And now my advice to your ladyship is to go and have a talk over this matter with your friend Mrs Measures, and her good sense will put things straight between you.'

But Lady Bristowe was obstinate as well as foolish, and ready to believe herself the best judge of her own actions. She had become inquisitive on the subject of Paula's misdemeanours at the schoolhouse, and suspected that Mrs Measures would make the best of them, if not deny them altogether. So she determined first to draw the truth out of Mr Gribble. But she displayed great caution on the occasion. She ordered her carriage to call on some friends at a distance, and declined to take Miss Brennan or the dogs with her.

'Ought not Totsie to go for a drive this afternoon?' pleaded the companion, who wanted

one herself. 'Your ladyship remarked that she refused her breakfast this morning.'

'Mind your own business, Sarah Brennan,' exclaimed Lady Bristowe sharply, 'and take the dog for a walk in the garden instead. When I want your company, I am perfectly able to tell you so.'

'Old cat!' ejaculated Miss Brennan, as the carriage rolled down the drive. 'I bet if she had that pasty-faced Mrs Hal Rushton for a companion she would take her with her everywhere. But she never thinks of me unless it is to look after her shawls or her dogs.'

But if Sarah Brennan thought that Paula Rushton stood higher in her employer's estimation that day than herself she was mistaken. Lady Bristowe's small mind was filled with the desire to find out all she could against her late *protégée*, and as soon as she had called upon her friends she desired the coachman to drive to Deepdale and stop at Mr Gribble's door. She had some insignificant question to ask—some trifling account for corn or straw to settle in

her hand—but her chief object in calling at the churchwarden's private residence was, of course, to try and lead the conversation round to Paula's illness, and see what revelations the mention of her name might not bring forth. It happened, however, to be market day, and Mr Gribble had gone to Haltham. Mrs Gribble was at home, though, and seeing her ladyship's carriage stop at the door, she ran down the garden path as fast as her unwieldy bulk would permit her and stood at the wicket gate, with her cap strings flying like pennants in the autumn breeze.

‘Good afternoon, Mrs Gribble,’ said Lady Bristowe condescendingly. ‘Can I see Mr Gribble on a little matter of business?’

‘Mr Gribble is hout, your ladyship. He have gone into Haltham to the market; but if your ladyship will give your horders to me—’

‘I will get out, Mrs Gribble, for a minute,’ returned Lady Bristowe, as she placed her plump hand on the shoulder of her footman and descended to the ground.

Mrs Gribble was astonished. Lady Bristowe had never called at her house before—even to pay a bill. Such transactions had always taken place through her coachman. She could not imagine what personal business she could have with her. She hurried on first to open the parlour door, and to usher her guest in, and then she fidgeted about the room, uncertain whether she ought to stand deferentially before her or take a chair and look as if she were at her ease.

‘Is it the little account, my lady?’ she began presently. ‘Mr Gribble ’e don’t care ’ow long it run at the Habbey. I know that.’

‘I have brought the account, and I wish to pay it,’ replied Lady Bristowe, as she produced the corn and hay bill and laid it with a ten-pound note upon the table. ‘But I had also a question to ask of Mr Gribble, which, doubtless, you can answer as well. As churchwarden, I believe he takes a good deal of interest in the village school?’

‘Oh, yes, my lady,’ said Mrs Gribble, who

had ventured by this time to work herself into a chair, 'e do. 'E's most henergetic, is Mr Gribble, in the church work, and spends hall his spare time a-looking round. I'm sure I and Mrs Haxworthy (which is the other churchwarden's lady) hoften says our good gentlemen his married to the church and schools, they're so hoften there.'

'And have you a good teacher, Mrs Gribble? Are you quite satisfied with her?'

Mrs Gribble lifted her hands to denote her admiration.

'Oh, your ladyship, we hare indeed. Miss Brown, she's jest a hangel. Such a contrast to—' But here Mrs Gribble, with sudden remembrance, stopped short.

'Such a contrast to *what*, Mrs Gribble?'

'Oh, my lady, I shouldn't have spoke, perhaps, but feelings will hup. But our former teacher, Miss Stafford as was, is a friend, I hear, hof your ladyship's.'

'No, Mrs Gribble; you have been misinformed. I *have* received Mrs Rushton at the Abbey,



but rumours have reached me since that make me fear I was hasty—rumours of her behaviour whilst she was the schoolmistress of Deepdale, and, to tell you the truth, I came here to-day to your husband, as to a God-fearing, upright, conscientious man, to hear what he could tell me regarding it. But, perhaps, *you* may remember the circumstance?’

‘*Remember* hit, my lady! No one hin Deepdale will hever forget it—not if they lives to be a ’undred. Mr ’Al Rushton, ’eadstrong like, ’e chose to marry ’er spite of heverythink, hand so I s’pose it’s all hover, and one had best ’old one’s tongue.’

‘But, Mrs Gribble, I must beg you, in confidence, to tell me what it was. I cannot, in justice to my name and family, admit guests to the Abbey of whose character there is the slightest doubt. I must entreat you to tell me all you know.’

But Mrs Gribble held back. She could talk to her equals fast enough, but to express her sentiments before this grand lady might be to

lose the custom of half the gentry in the neighbourhood. And she was a friend of Mrs Measures, too.

‘I’m sure, your ladyship,’ she commenced, ‘I’m loath to refuse you hanything, but Mr Bribble ’e wouldn’t like my saying nothing as could find its way back to the vicarage.’

‘But they knew it—whatever it may be—at the vicarage, surely?’

‘Oh, yes, my lady. It was there the hinfamous scandal was sifted, has you may say, but Mrs Measures she chose to ’ave it ’ushed up. Hand it’s as much has hour comfort’s worth—Mr Gribble hand me—to say a word more habout it.’

‘It will never get to the vicarage through *me*,’ remarked Lady Bristowe.

‘You can promise *hour* names will not transpire, my lady?’

‘Certainly, Mrs Gribble. I ask you, *as a friend*, to let me know the truth of this matter.’

‘Oh, well, my lady, hif it’s to oblige *you*,’ cried Mrs Gribble, delighted to have a shot at

the enemy, 'hi'd sacrifice heverythink. It was a 'orrible thing, my lady—quite degrading. Miss Stafford she was found by my own 'usband, late at night, shut hup in her rooms with two gentlemen, and one was quite a ferocious lookin' feller with a beard, a foreign chap, Mr Gribble said. And when Miss Stafford as was she was hasked for a hexplanation, she wouldn't give none, not heven his name, but stood there, hobstinate-like, before the minister and the churchwardens, and refused to hopen her mouth, and so she was turned hout of her place with hignominy.'

'But how did Mr Rushton, who holds so good a position here, come to marry her, then?'

'Ah, my lady, 'e was one of 'em. 'E knew more than met the heye, you may depend upon that, so 'e thought fit to shelter 'er. She 'ad to leave Deepdale whether or no. Not a lady would send her daughters to learn of 'er after they come to know of it; but Mr 'Al Rushton 'e follered 'er and married 'er (at least 'e *says* 'e married 'er), hand Mr and Mrs Measures they hagreed for to let bygones be bygones, I s'pose,

and to receive 'er for 'er 'usband's sake. But 't isn't heverybody in Deepdale has sees with *their* heyes, your ladyship. 'Tain't many has calls hat 'Ighbridge 'All, though I 'ave 'eard lately has that poor dear forgiving soul, Mrs Rushton, the old gentleman's widow, 'as been good enough to go up and nurse Mrs 'Al through the judgment that's come upon 'er.'

'Well,' said Lady Bristowe, who was burning with indignation, 'I *am* surprised that my friend Mrs Measures never gave me a hint of all this. I hardly think she has behaved fairly to me in not doing so.'

'Ah, my lady, there's many a one in Deepdale as has wondered to see the falarity you 'ave demeaned yourself to use with Mrs 'Al Rushton. A many would 'ave liked to speak, but durstn't. We was too low hand 'umble for that. But that a lady like your ladyship should drive side by side with a young person has was discovered in such hacts—'

'It will *never* occur again, Mrs Gribble, you may be sure of that,' replied Lady Bristowe, as

she rose from her seat, 'and I am very much obliged to you for opening my eyes in the matter. I shall not betray you, you may be sure. I had already heard something of the kind before from our curate, Mr Vernon. Never mind the change from the note. You have two little daughters, I believe, buy them some dolls with what may be over. Good afternoon.'

And Lady Bristowe got into her carriage and drove away.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A VALIANT PARTISAN.

DEAR, gentle Mrs Measures was seated in the vicarage drawing-room, engaged in needlework. She was one of those simple souls who neither need nor seek for excitement, but are always to be found when wanted—neatly dressed whatever the hour of the day, and ready with a quiet welcome for their visitors. Mrs Measures was rather anxious about Paula just then, and as she stitched away at the vicar's shirts she was thinking very earnestly about her. During all her uneventful married life she had never conceived so deep an interest in anyone as in Hal Rushton's wife. She had never believed a word against her, and she never would. Whatever

might have been equivocal in her actions whilst she was the school teacher of Deepdale, Mrs Measures felt sure could be easily explained if Paula chose to explain it, and the only puzzling part of it to the vicar's wife was that she had *not* so chosen. It had seemed to her simple mind such an easy way by which to set matters right with everyone. But Paula had elected otherwise, and the affair had almost faded from Mrs Measures' mind. The girl was married now, and in quite a different position of life. What was worrying her friend about her at the present moment was her utter abandonment to her grief for her mother's death. It was so hopeless—so unresigned—that it seemed wicked in Mrs Measures' sight. She had seen her several times—Paula would not deny herself to this her best and dearest friend in Deepdale—but her visits had not been calculated to make either of them happier. Paula's violent outbursts of despair, of self-reproach, even of questioning the goodness of the Hand that had laid the bereavement upon her, had shocked and grieved Mary

Measures, who under similar circumstances would have bowed her head to the storm, and let all God's waves go over her. She did not blame her young friend, whose sorrow was evidently genuine, but she felt unhappy about her, and wished she would open her heart freely, and see if together they could not discern some streak of light in the appalling darkness. But Paula was remarkably reserved even with Mrs Measures. The same determination not to open her lips that had displayed itself under her cross-examination by the vicar and the churchwardens seemed to have come over her again, and though she kept on moaning for her mother, she steadfastly refused to air the subject, or to enter into any details concerning it, and Mrs Measures believed that until she could bring herself to do so her grief would stand no chance of working its own cure. She was musing thus, sad, but very loyal to the girl she had learned to love, when Lady Bristowe's carriage stopped before the door. Mrs Measures did not particularly enjoy the society of Lady Bristowe, but in her capacity



as the vicar's wife she felt bound to receive everybody, and so she rose with a smile to greet her as she entered the room. But her ladyship did not smile. Her face was very red with suppressed indignation and the autumn air, and as she sank into the best arm-chair she looked as vindictive as her fat, jolly cheeks would allow her to do. Mrs Measures perceived the difference in her at once.

‘Why, what is the matter?’ she exclaimed. ‘Has anything occurred to annoy you?’

‘Yes, Mrs Measures, something has occurred to annoy me *very much indeed*, and it concerns your *protégée*, Mrs Hal Rushton. Why did you not tell me, before you permitted me to invite her as a guest to Tor Abbey, what sort of a character she had borne whilst she was the teacher of Deepdale school?’

Now, Mrs Measures was very gentle, but she was not servile. She was meek as a mouse with her friends, but she could fight like a lion for them, and all the lion that was in her was roused upon this occasion.

‘In the first place, Lady Bristowe,’ she replied in a dignified manner, as she resumed her seat, ‘you never consulted me before asking Paula to dine with you, and if you had, I should have told you that, since she is my friend, your doubts were as insulting to me as to her.’

‘Oh, but you can’t deny having heard it, Mrs Measures, because I understand that the official inquiries into her behaviour took place in your presence, and in this very house, and that the young woman was turned out of her situation, in consequence.’

‘That is not true,’ said the vicar’s wife. ‘Miss Stafford (as she was then) resigned her appointment herself, and left Deepdale the following day.’

‘Her name was *not* Miss Stafford. That is another subterfuge. Her mother’s name was Sutton, and I suspect there must have been some very good reason for changing her name.’

‘I consider your suspicion both unjust and uncharitable, Lady Bristowe.’

‘I don’t see it. People don’t change their names, as a rule, unless they have done something to be ashamed of. And then this scandal about her being locked up in the schoolhouse with some strange man. Why, it is terrible! I wonder she ever had the face to show herself in Deepdale again.’

‘The very fact of her doing so ought to convince your ladyship that she has nothing to be ashamed of. But *who* has been repeating this scandal to you, Lady Bristowe? A few weeks ago you could not speak highly enough of Mrs Rushton, and now you seem to have turned entirely against her. As her friend, I must ask the reason.’

‘That is not far to search, Mrs Measures. I called on Mrs Hal Rushton at your request—’

‘Oh, excuse me. You heard her name first from my lips, perhaps, but I never urged you to make her acquaintance. On the contrary, it was your own proposal to take your carriage to Haltham to meet the young people on their return from their wedding tour, and I

demurred at the idea at first for fear lest they should feel less at home in the presence of a stranger.'

'But you never mentioned a word about this business or I certainly should not have gone.'

'I did not consider you had any right to hear it. It was past and over, and Paula was coming as a guest to my house—as an *honoured* guest, Lady Bristowe, as she always will be to me. I believe in her, and I believe in her right to keep her own counsel where she chooses to do so.'

'That may be all very well for *you*, Mrs Measures,' replied her ladyship rather insolently. 'Of course, as a clergyman's wife, you have to receive all sorts of people—good, bad, and indifferent—but *I* hold too high a position, as the mistress of Tor Abbey, to be able to do as I choose in such matters. And I repeat that it was not a friendly action on your part to permit me to extend my patronage to people who are not worthy of it.'

'The Rushtons are far above your patronage,

Lady Bristowe. They neither need nor desire it. I am not sure that even your acquaintance-ship has given them any pleasure.'

'And you refuse, then, to let me hear what you know about this scandal?'

'Utterly. It is no business of yours or mine. And if it were, you would hear nothing about it from me. Paula is my friend—more than my friend—I love her dearly, and I am not in the habit of discussing the doings nor the characters of my friends.'

'You are obstinately determined to shield her,' replied Lady Bristowe angrily, 'but under the circumstances I feel I have a right to demand the truth, and I shall appeal to Mr Measures for it.'

'Here is Mr Measures,' exclaimed her hostess, rapping at the window pane to attract the attention of her husband in the garden; 'but question him as you may, you will get no other answer from him than you have from me.'

The vicar obeyed the summons, and entered the drawing-room, with a spud in his hand and a

considerable amount of garden earth upon his boots.

‘You will excuse my attire, I hope, Lady Bristowe,’ he began. ‘I saw your horses some time ago, but was too diffident to appear before you till summoned. But this is a busy time for gardeners. I suppose you have a fine show of dahlias coming on at the Abbey?’

‘Yes, Mr Measures. The gardener tells me we shall have some splendid blooms this autumn. But I want to speak to you upon quite another matter. You will be sorry to hear that I and your wife have fallen out terribly this afternoon.’

‘You and Mary!’ exclaimed the vicar, with surprise, ‘surely not. What could you find to quarrel about?’

‘Lady Bristowe has appealed to me,’ said Mrs Measures, with a slightly heightened colour, ‘for the details of the story that Mr Gribble set about concerning Paula before her marriage, and I have refused to discuss the matter with her. It is a thing of the past, and best forgotten,

and Paula is our friend, so I decline to talk of her behind her back.'

'Quite right, quite right,' replied the vicar; 'it was an unfortunate business, but it is over, and, for all our sakes, the less said about it the better.'

'But I am not satisfied with so lame an explanation, Mr Measures,' said Lady Bristowe; 'you seem to forget that I have stooped to notice this young person (whom I believed to be worthy of it).'

'And so she is,' cried the vicar's wife indignantly.

'Pray, Mrs Measures, let me finish what I was about to say to your husband. I have asked her to my house, and visited her in return, and should have continued to do so (although she has behaved most ungratefully lately in refusing to admit me to her presence), but I have heard some discreditable stories concerning her behaviour whilst she was the schoolmistress of Deepdale, and came to your wife for a confirmation or a denial of them. She refuses to give me either.'

‘You set her a hard task,’ replied the vicar, smiling affectionately at his wife.

‘But, Edward, *you* can satisfy Lady Bristowe on this point,’ said Mrs Measures anxiously; ‘*you* can tell her that Paula would not have remained on friendly terms at the vicarage if there had been the slightest doubt of the purity of her motives or her character.’

‘My dear Mary, you know I never interfere with your friendships. I have too much faith in your good sense,’ said the vicar evasively.

‘But you do not deny the truth of the reports, sir, all the same,’ remarked Lady Bristowe.

‘The reports, as your ladyship calls them, were never verified. Miss Stafford preferred to resign her appointment to satisfying the curiosity of the parish guardians. Whether she was right or wrong signifies little now. She is no longer Miss Stafford, and I daresay she has almost forgotten that she was ever the village school teacher.’

‘She was always far above it in every way,’ ex-



claimed Mrs Measures. 'She is a lady by birth and education, and only accepted such a subordinate position in order not to be a burden on her mother, and I honoured her for it, and I upheld her in her decision. *Why* should she have pandered to the vulgar curiosity of people far beneath her in station when she knew she was in the right?'

'Oh, it is very easy to *say* we are in the right,' remarked Lady Bristowe, 'but when our characters are called into question, Mrs Measures, I consider it is a duty we owe to ourselves and our friends to clear them as far as lies in our power.'

'Friends—*real* friends—don't require any such assurance,' said Mrs Measures warmly. 'And as for characters, whose character has *not* been assailed in some form or other? Has not yours, Lady Bristowe?'

Lady Bristowe rose from her seat with a crimson face, and shook out her silken skirts.

'Mrs Measures,' she said loftily, 'be kind

enough to see me to my carriage. I wish to go home.'

'I hope your ladyship does not imagine—'

'I wish to go home,' repeated Lady Bristowe distinctly; 'and I wash my hands of Mrs Hal Rushton and all her antecedents from this day and for ever.'

And so saying she sailed out of the vicarage drawing-room and drove off in solemn dudgeon.

'Mary, my dear,' said Mr Measures, as he re-entered his wife's presence, 'you shouldn't have said that. I am afraid you have mortally offended her ladyship. What made you do it? I never heard you say such an ill-natured thing before.'

'I said it because I despise her for turning against Paula, when she has tested what a sweet, dear girl she is, just because someone has raked up this detestable scandal. Why couldn't she be satisfied with my assurance that there is no truth in it? And you disappointed me too, Edward. Why couldn't you have told the old lady that it was a pack of falsehoods, in-

stead of beating about the bush as you did, and making her suspicions stronger instead of weaker?’

The vicar looked distressed, and sat down on the sofa beside his wife.

‘Mary, my dear,’ he said, ‘I don’t want to upset you, but I can’t say what I do not believe to be true. I passed over a great deal at that time, for your sake; and because I believed Miss Stafford would leave Deepdale for ever. When she came back to us in such an altered position, and you seemed anxious to receive her at the vicarage, I made no objection, because I love to please you, and I would rather err on the side of leniency. I like the girl, too, and wish anything that was ever said against her to be forgotten. But I *cannot* overlook the fact that she refused to give any satisfactory explanation of the matter, and if you wish me to say otherwise, you must keep me out of all discussions of the subject.’

‘Which means that you believe the worst you can of her. Edward, I didn’t think it of you.

I have always quoted you as the most Christian man I know,' replied his wife.

'I hope I take a Christian view of the matter, Mary, but I *cannot* believe against my senses. I told you at the time, and I repeat it now, an innocent woman would have disclosed *everything* sooner than have a slur cast upon her character. Where there is concealment there is usually something wrong. It may lie with others, still it is wrong, and the guiltless has to bear the brunt of it. Tell me the truth, now. As matters stand, however much you may regard Paula Rushton, aye, and believe in her from your own consciousness, would you like to hear me *swear* that there is nothing in her antecedents that she wishes to conceal?'

'*Swear*,' repeated Mrs Measures in a startled voice. 'I have never heard you swear, Edward, and I shouldn't like you to do it for anybody.'

'But, my dear, a man's word should be as sacred as his oath. The simple truth with regard to your young friend is, that I know nothing for certain, and therefore I can say nothing.'

‘Well, she has lost *one* friend through that detestable Mr Gribble, and she may lose others,’ exclaimed Mary Measures resolutely, ‘but she shall never lose *me*, not if I have to stand beside her in a felon’s dock.’

‘And I consider that one of the best things in her favour is her capability of attracting and holding such a friend as you are, Mary. Don’t fret about her losing Lady Bristowe. After all, she is but a foolish, arrogant, and purse-proud woman, and I feel sure that Hal Rushton will not regret the loss of her acquaintance, whatever his wife may do.’

‘Oh, I don’t think Paula cares two straws about her, only she is so prostrate at this moment that any revival of the old scandal would be sure to distress and make her worse. Edward, you never saw anyone so despondent. I believe, if it were not for her husband, she would do something rash. She sits half the day silent, with her hands idly folded in her lap, and if you get her to mention her loss, she reproaches herself so bitterly that you would think she had

had something to do with it. If she had *killed* her mother she could hardly feel more remorse. And her condition is having such an effect upon her poor husband. What am I to do with them both?’

‘Why doesn’t Hal Rushton take her away?’

‘She won’t go. She seems always to be on the point of receiving some news, as if she expected her mother might return and not find her there. Sometimes I really think her grief has affected her mind.’

‘Poor girl! It is very sad, and occurring so soon after her marriage. I heard a rumour to-day that old Mrs Rushton has been re-admitted to the Hall. Is that true?’

‘She goes up there daily to superintend the housekeeping, of which Paula is quite incapable at present. And the old woman appears to be on her best behaviour. I wonder if she has any hope of being reinstated at the Hall?’

‘It wouldn’t be a bad plan, if she saves your friend the drudgery of housekeeping. But what

would Hal say to it? He has such a holy terror of his stepmother and her son.'

'Oh, that dreadful Ted Snaley. I don't think Paula could stand him in the house, however useful his mother might be. But when she is well again—'

'Mary, my dear,' said the vicar anxiously, as he put his hand under her chin and turned her face up to view, 'are you crying?'

'Oh, Edward, sometimes I fear Paula may never get well again, and then to hear people so ill-natured about her!'

'There, there, dear, don't anticipate evil. Her present condition, after such a shock as she has received, is only natural. Pray for her Mary, and pray with her, and all will be right again. You are her most valiant partisan on earth. Try some of your persuasive powers with Heaven. And if you think it would do Paula any good to come and stay at the vicarage, where you could be always with her, bring them both over here, and that will be the best proof Lady Bristowe could have that if I can-

not swear that black is white, I am at least content to believe that my neighbours are as good as I am myself.'

'They are *not*—they are *not*,' replied his wife enthusiastically. 'You are the best and the most righteous man I ever knew, Edward, and I would rather be a sinner at your mercy than sit in the highest seat of the world's favour.'

'But you're a silly woman, and know nothing,' said her husband, as he kissed her.



## CHAPTER IX.

### NEW PROSPECTS.

THE little world of Deepdale was really shocked when Paula appeared amongst them again, so changed was she from the bright, happy bride that Hal Rushton had brought home to High-bridge Hall, and even from the pensive, girlish school teacher who had only seemed to drag her weary life away. Her clear complexion had turned to sodden white, her eyes were dull and languid, her form seemed shrunk beneath her clinging black garments. Even Lady Bristowe, encountering her grave salutation one day, as the little pony carriage passed her ladyship's cumbersome chariot, turned round with horrified amazement to Sarah Brennan and said,—

‘Is that *really* Mrs Hal Rushton? If she

hadn't bowed to me, I don't believe I should ever have known her again. I never saw anybody so changed in all my life.'

'Yes, my lady, she is terribly white and thin. I am sure that anybody, to look at her, would say she'd got something on her mind. Quite the ghost of her former self. And her mother-in-law says she's so weak she can hardly get up and down stairs without assistance.'

'*Her mother-in-law!*' repeated Lady Bristowe; 'you don't mean to tell me, Sarah Brennan, that you have any acquaintanceship with that low person the Widow Rushton?'

Miss Brennan coughed dubiously.

'I have met her once or twice, my lady, when I have been out walking. It's not always possible to avoid it, you see, nor to help passing a few words when you are spoken to.'

'Well, I beg you *will* avoid it for the future, Sarah Brennan, or you will leave my service,' rejoined Lady Bristowe. 'I will not have a person who is constantly in my company associate with people of that class. You had

better go down into the servants' hall at once.'

'But I hear that Mrs Rushton is always with her daughter-in-law Mrs Hal,' said Miss Brennan. 'She's head housekeeper and nurse and everything at Highbridge Hall now.'

'That's nothing to me. Mrs Hal Rushton can do as she likes. My orders to you are imperative.'

'Of course, my lady. But I thought as young Mrs Rushton is such a favourite at the Abbey—'

'She is *not* a favourite there any longer. I don't wish to hear you even mention her name. I consider that she entered my house under false pretences, and her visit will never be repeated. And I desire that *you* drop all intimacy with the family also. Do you understand me, Sarah Brennan?'

'Oh, yes, my lady, perfectly,' returned the companion, who was only too pleased to think that her rival was out of favour.

It was true that Lady Bristowe's visit to the

vicarage had decided her to have no more to do with Paula Rushton. Mrs Measures' warm advocacy had had no effect against the vicar's half-hearted condemnation, and Lady Bristowe was not a great enough nor a noble enough woman to cling to anyone against the opinion of the majority. So she thought it more prudent to go with the stream, and discontinue her visits to Highbridge Hall.

Paula scarcely noticed her defalcation, and if she did it was to rejoice that the nuisance of refusing to see her had ceased. Although she looked so thin and pale, her health was certainly improved, and her mental equilibrium was restored. Some months had passed now since her mother's death, and she could speak of her loss with calmness and a certain degree of hope. Her kind friend Mary Measures had gently approached the subject with her, and dwelt so much on the happy side of it — on the thought of her mother at rest from the cares — which had worried her in this life, and reunited to the husband she had loved so much and

mourned so deeply—that Paula had been able at last to ease her labouring mind by telling of her mother's virtues and affection for herself, and repeating many a little anecdote of her goodness and patience and long-suffering. So far her grief was somewhat mitigated, and had her cause for trouble ended here it would (like all such bereavements) have had its bitterness assuaged by time. But there was that other unnatural grief to fight against—the grief she dared not speak of, and which ate into her very soul—the mysterious loss of Paulie. Mrs Measures wondered why the girl continued so hopelessly despairing. It was so unlike the usual effect of trouble on a gentle and unexcitable nature like hers. She consulted her own husband and Paula's husband on the subject, but neither of them could suggest a solution. At last she thought she had solved the mystery. As Christmas approached Paula confided to her that she was about to become a mother. That fact seemed to explain everything. Physical weakness had prevented the poor girl getting

the better of her mental despondency. And now, thought Mrs Measures, everything must be right. Paula would have a grand vehicle of distraction. Mary Measures had never been a mother herself, to her great disappointment, but like many childless women she took a vivid interest in little babies and all that pertained to them. She kissed Paula a dozen times when the news was made known to her, and told her that God was mercifully sending this great blessing in order to compensate her for her loss.

‘You will have your hands full now, dear,’ she exclaimed, ‘and no time to give to unavailing regret. You must begin to fight against it from this very moment, Paula, for the sake of the dear baby that is coming. You would not like to harm it, I am sure. Suppose it were born weakly, or crippled, or with any other affliction because of your want of self-control—’

‘No, no, not *that*. Don’t speak of that,’ said Paula feverishly.

She was lying on the sofa at the time, and

Mary Measures, who sat beside her, was alarmed to see how she became crimson and livid by turn.

‘My dear, don’t imagine I suppose it for a moment—why, Paula, what chance is there of such a thing?—only, I have always heard that expectant mothers should be careful above all else to keep their minds at rest. Oh, Paula, dear, don’t look like that. You will make me so sorry that I spoke. Think only, dear, of the great joy that is coming to you.’

‘It is not certain it will be a joy,’ replied Paula sadly; ‘sometimes children are sent to be a curse instead of a blessing.’

‘Oh, surely not. Think of having a dear baby of your own to love and cherish, and to bring up to be a comfort to you.’

‘I don’t *want* to think of it,’ said Paula fretfully. ‘I am not even sure that I want *it*. Children are certain cares and very uncertain blessings.’

Mrs Measures did not know what to make of her friend’s state of mind. A young woman

married to the man she loved, and expecting her first baby, to speak of it in such a melancholy and disparaging manner was an anomaly to her, and made her think how differently *she* would have felt under similar circumstances. As she was leaving the Hall that day she met Mrs Rushton, senior, walking about the drive and picking off the blackened leaves which had been killed by the first frost. The vicar's wife disliked the widow exceedingly, and could not understand Paula delegating the whole of her household duties to her hands. Still, as she *was* there, and evidently a comfort or assistance to her friend, she saluted her courteously.

'I 'ope you find Mrs 'Al better and more resigned like to-day, ma'am?' said Mrs Rushton.

'I think she is better, but there is still great room for improvement,' replied Mrs Measures. 'It is a bad sign, I am afraid, her showing such indifference about her condition.'

'Yes; quite unnateral, ain't it. However, I've sick and monthlied for thirty years and seen many sich. It hall depends upon their 'ealth.



Mrs 'Al ain't strong, and sees heverything in a gloomy light. She'll be well enough by-and-by, though I don't think she 'as a strong constitootion, and will take a lot of care and attention.'

'Are you going to nurse her in her confinement?' inquired Mrs Measures, rather anxiously.

'Oh, lor', ma'am, I 'opes not. I've done a deal of nussing in my time, and I wants a little rest. I ain't as young as I was—fifty-eight on my last birthday—and I'm not strong enough for racket. I've recommended Mrs 'Al a hexcellent nuss, Mrs Cornes of 'Altham, a good, honest, sober, kind-hearted creature as will do 'er and the baby justice in hevery way. I shouldn't care for the job myself at all, ma'am.'

'I only thought,' said the vicar's wife, 'that as you seem so friendly—'

'Oh, we're friendly enough,' interrupted Mrs Rushton. 'Mrs 'Al, she 'ave turned me and my boy out of the 'All as you may say, but I don't bear 'er no malice. And when I see 'er so unnaterally cast down by 'er ma's death, and

giving way so terrible, I thought it only right for Al's sake to offer to 'elp 'er. I can't forget as 'Al is my poor dear 'usband's son, nor that 'e asked me with 'is last breath for to look arter 'im and 'is in every way.'

'Really,' said Mary Measures to her husband, some hours later, 'I begin to blame myself for having thought and spoken so harshly of old Mrs Rushton. Of course she is an ignorant and low-born woman (she can't help that), but I think there's a lot of good in her. She speaks so kindly now of Hal and Paula. She seems quite to have forgotten her old grudge against her stepson's marriage.'

'All my wife's geese are swans,' replied the vicar affectionately

'You don't believe in her having turned over a new leaf then, Edward?'

'I haven't observed it yet, my dear. I think the woman is a detestable hypocrite, and I would not trust her further than I could see her. I shall never forget her conduct at Farmer Rushton's death. If she had had her way then,

Hal would have been left a dependant on her bounty.'

'Then isn't it all the more to her credit that she has forgiven you for outwitting her, and Hal for benefiting by your sense of justice?'

'It would be—if she *had*. But I don't believe she has forgiven either Hal or me.'

'Do you think she is playing a part, then?'

'I shouldn't like to express an opinion on the subject. But I should be very wary of the old woman myself.'

'Oh, Edward, you make me feel so miserable. Is nothing in this world what it seems?'

'Very little, Mary, very little,' was the vicar's reply.

In this instance Mr Measures was decidedly right. Mrs Rushton played her cards so well that for a while Hal and Paula were completely taken in by her. She fully intended to nurse Paula herself, but she knew her stepson so much disliked her presence that the very mention of such a thing would rouse his opposition. So she pretended that she would

not undertake it upon any account, and highly recommended the services of Mrs Cornes, who had nursed Lady Warden with her son and heir, and bore the highest testimonials from her ladyship. Under ordinary circumstances Hal Rushton would not have cared *who* nursed his wife through her expected trial, but as it was his deepest fears were excited by her condition. He could not feel any pride or pleasure in the anticipation of the birth of his child, so fully was his mind occupied by Paula's extreme weakness of body and depression of mind. He was ready to cavil at the capabilities, even, of Mrs Cornes, until he had seen the very flattering letter of recommendation with which the Countess of Warden had sent her on her way. And then he told his wife to write and engage her at any cost, to keep the month of June open, in order that she might spend it at Highbridge Hall. But Paula was indolent and apathetic as usual, and Mrs Rushton offered to step into the breach and interview Mrs Cornes on her account.

‘Don’t you worrit yourself about it, my dear,’ she said. ‘No one expects ladies in your sitivation to go running after their nusses. You’ve seen ’ow ’igh ’er recommendations is, and I’ll go into ’Altham for you and settle with ’er about the time and so forth. Or, you can write ’er a letter, and I’ll bring you the hanswer. I must go into ’Altham after some more cambric and flannel or we sha’n’t never be ready in time.’

‘But it will be such a trouble to you, Mrs Rushton,’ replied Paula languidly.

‘Lor’, no, my dear. Not if ’Al will let Ted ’ave the tax-cart or the shay to drive me into ’Altham. You can’t be expected to know what’s necessary, as I do—*you*, who ’ave never ’ad a baby to ’andle before.’

At this Paula coloured slightly and turned uneasily away, and the widow noted both actions.

‘Mother,’ said Ted Snaley, as he drove her into Haltham the following day, ‘are you a-going to let Mrs Cornes nuss Mrs ’Al?’

‘Not if I can ’elp it, Ted. It’s all chance, though, and I don’t see my way clearly yet; but if it’s a boy, it’ll ruin your prospects of getting hany of the property as was left to you and me by my ’usband, and we was defrauded out of it. And if it’s heither boy or gal, and lives and thrives, there won’t be no ’ope for us, for if we found out Mrs ’Al’s secret to-morrow (and that she ’as a secret I’d lay my right ’and) and ’e turned ’er out of the ’ouse, why there’d be the child for ’im to live and work for, and we might go to the wall. No, Ted, if this ’ere child lives, we’d better give hup the game haltogether.’

‘Well, then, it *mustn’t* live. Nothing heasier.’

‘’Ush, ’ush, my boy; don’t ’oller like that. ’Ow can you tell ’oo’s be’ind the ’edge? If you must speak of it, speak as soft as you can.’

With this the widow turned her head round and whispered in his ear.

‘It *won’t* live,’ she said, ‘it’ll be too weakly.’

‘But if Mrs Cornes gets ’old of it, mother, ’ow then?’

‘She sha’n’t get ’old of it, then, Ted, not if *I* knows it.’

‘’Ow will you manage it?’

‘Give ’er a wrong date. Nothing heasier than to make a mistake of that sort. I shall tell ’er to keep ’erself ready for the hend of June, and we shall ’ave it ’ere by the first, when she’ll be busy with someone helse. Then they’ll be all in an ’urry and flummux, and glad of me or hanybody to take ’er place.’

‘’Urre, mother, you’ve ’it it,’ cried Mr Snaley. ‘And what about *her*?’

‘Oh, we mustn’t think of nothink more, Ted. We’ve said too much about it already. But Mrs ’Al ain’t in a good state of health, to my mind, and I should feel very nervous about ’er, if she was hanything to me. I’ve seen many a poor creature go off at sich times as ’ad double ’er strength.’

Mrs Rushton found Mrs Cornes at home, and had soon put her into the possession of the fact that her services would be required at Highbridge Hall about the end of June.

‘The hend of June,’ said that worthy, as she examined a much bescribbled almanac of the current year; ‘what day should you take it to be doo, now? Before the twentieth, say, or hafter?’

‘Oh, lor’, Mrs Cornes, ma’am, it’s quite himpossible to fix it for certain. You know what these young creetures with their first hare—with no more hidea of the when nor the wherefore than the babies themselves. But *h’I* should say *hafter* the twentieth, hif it was put to me.’

‘I couldn’t take the case afore, ma’am. I’m doo at Mrs Nelson’s, which I’ve nussed with six a’ready, on heighteenth of May, and she generally come to ’er day, and wouldn’t part with me hunder the month for untold gold. So there it lay, you see. On the heighteenth hor twentieth of June I shall be free to take your lady if she go to ’er time. But I had better see ’er about it myself. When shall I find her at ’ome?’

‘That I can’t say, Mrs Cornes, nor hif she’d see you if you called. She’s ’ad a terrible loss in her ma, poor thing, who died in her chair suddent-



like, and it's hupset her mind a bit, so that she's very queer in 'er 'ead at times and won't see a soul.'

'Oh, my!' exclaimed the nurse, with a shiver, 'I don't like them sort of cases at all. It's to be 'oped she won't go hoff 'er 'ead when her time comes. I've 'ad terrible work sometimes even to keep 'em in bed. One of my ladies got up at night, when we was hall asleep, and flung 'erself and 'er baby right out of the winder.'

'Lor', how 'orrible. I 'opes there'll be nothink of the sort 'ere. But if you'll write a line, ma'am, for to say as you'll hold yourself engaged to Mrs 'Al Rushton for June, I'll take it back to 'er, hand if she wants to see you before'and she can write and let you know.'

Upon which the nurse wrote a few words as desired, which the widow took back to Paula. But Hal was not satisfied with the transaction.

'This is nonsense,' he said. 'I am not going to let you engage a nurse without seeing her. She might turn out to be some gin-drinking,

snuffy old woman whom we couldn't endure in the house. You must write and tell her to come over here, Paula.'

'Oh, Hal, not yet. It is not necessary. There is heaps of time. I do hate strangers so I don't want to see anybody.'

'Perhaps, my darling; but if you leave it till too late you may not get a nurse at all. Only see if you like this Mrs Cornes. If not, I will send to London sooner than you should not be properly attended to.'

So Paula sent a note to Mrs Cornes, desiring her to come over to Highbridge Hall, and confided it to the care of her factotum, Mrs Rushton, who brought back a message to the effect that Mrs Cornes had been called out unexpectedly to nurse a gentleman who had sustained a serious accident, and it was impossible she could leave him, but the first moment she was at liberty she would come to Deepdale to see her employer, and some weeks, she hoped, before her services would be required. With which assurance Paula appeared to be perfectly satisfied, as she lay back

on her sofa by the open window and watched the blossoming of the coming summer.

‘Have you never seen your nurse yet, Paula?’ asked Mary Measures one evening, as she sat beside her friend and watched the somewhat tremulous and changeful expression on her face.

‘Not yet. She is too busily engaged, but she is coming over to see me the beginning of next month. I hear she is a very respectable woman, and I feel quite satisfied about her.’

‘Of course,’ answered the vicar’s wife cheerfully; ‘but I think she should be in the house beforehand. Suppose you were taken ill in the night? It is such a long way to drive into Haltham.’

‘Only seven miles,’ said Paula indifferently. ‘Hal’s little mare would do it under the hour.’

‘But that means another hour to come back again, and allowing for probable delays and Mrs Cornes’ preparations, perhaps three hours,’ replied her friend anxiously.

‘Well, what of that? It will be all right. And *you* would come to me at any time, wouldn’t you, Mary?’

‘You know I would, dear, but I should not be of much use, and I can’t bear the idea of your being left alone so long. I wonder it doesn’t frighten you, Paula; but you seem quite indifferent on the matter. One would think, to hear you talk, that you had a nursery full upstairs.’

‘Oh, it will be all right. It is no use worrying,’ replied Paula listlessly, as she turned her face round to the window.

The starlings and blackbirds were hopping about the newly mown lawn, picking up the unfortunate worms and grubs. (How little one ever thinks, by-the-bye, when contemplating a peaceful scene of rural happiness, how many innocent creatures that contribute to it are feeling anything but peaceful or happy the while.) The gardener was potting out the beds of geraniums, verbenas and calceolarias, and Lady Bristowe’s Blenheim puppy, now full

grown, was playing about with a noisy fox terrier, and getting much the worst of the fun. As Mrs Measures watched Paula gazing at their frolics, with a smile, she suddenly saw a deep flush rise to her forehead and fade away again, leaving her ashy pale.

‘Paula,’ she exclaimed quickly, ‘are you in any pain? You don’t seem well to me.’

‘I don’t feel quite the thing,’ replied the girl languidly. ‘It is so warm and close, and I get so tired of lying here.’

‘Why don’t you go for a drive? It would do you good this lovely evening. Cannot Mr Rushton take you? Is he too busy?’

‘*Too busy,*’ repeated Paula, with a faint smile, ‘why, Mary, you don’t half know yet what a darling my Hal is. No business, nor pleasure, nor anything, would keep him from waiting upon me, especially now. I am quite ashamed sometimes to trouble him so much. Oh, he is far too good, too kind. I am thankful when he will take a little leisure for himself.’

‘You are very happy with him, Paula.’

‘As far as *he* is concerned,’ she answered without thinking, ‘very—*very* happy. If I die within the next month, Mary, I shall have had more than my share of earthly happiness.’

‘Why should you talk of dying, dear?’ said Mrs Measures tenderly. ‘You mustn’t even think of such a thing. You are as strong as most women are at such a time.’

‘Do you think so?’ replied Paula, with her eyes raised to the sky. ‘But I have suffered so much lately, you know, and—and it makes me lose hope.’

When Mary Measures left her she went in search of Hal Rushton, and found him busy over his stable accounts, and smoking a pipe, which he laid down on her approach.

‘Now, Mr Rushton, don’t do that,’ she said, ‘or I shall run away. I only came to speak to you about Paula. I wish this Mrs Cornes was in the house. I don’t think she is quite well.’

Hal started from his seat, pipe and all else forgotten.

‘*Not well!*’ he echoed. ‘Do you mean—’

‘No, no; don’t alarm yourself, and remember I am very ignorant about such matters. Still, if Mrs Cornes could be communicated with, without alarming Paula, I think it would be desirable to do so in case of necessity.’

‘But the woman is not at home. She is nursing some man out in the country. And there is no other nurse in Haltham. What on earth can I do? We didn’t expect her services would be required for the next three weeks.’

‘Mr Rushton, don’t think anything more about it. *I* daresay I am all wrong. But Paula looks feverish and uneasy. Will you go up to her, and if I can be of any use, you know where to find me.’

‘Thank you, yes. I will go at once,’ and he flew upstairs like a bird to the presence of his wife.

‘My darling, my own darling,’ he exclaimed anxiously, as he bent over her couch, ‘what is the matter? Are you not well?’

‘Quite as well as usual,’ she said, twining her arms round his neck, and drawing his face down to her own. ‘What has that silly Mary been saying to my love, to make him look so frightened. I have a headache from the heat, and I am tired, that is all—’

And she kissed him fondly, almost passionately, as she spoke.

‘My own wife,’ he murmured, ‘what should I do if you were taken ill without better help than we could give you?’

‘There is no fear of it,’ she answered stoutly, though she knew in her heart that there was every fear. But she lay there in the twilight, with her husband’s face pressed against her own, and did not let him guess a tittle of what she was suffering. But a few hours later it was impossible to disguise it. Hal rushed into the vicarage as white as a sheet with fear, to entreat Mrs Measures to come to his wife at once, as



there was no doubt that her trial was near at hand.

‘What can I do?’ he exclaimed distractedly as they walked back together to the Hall. ‘I know it is of no use going for Mrs Cornes, and Dr Addison is so young, I am half afraid Paula will object to his attending her. Oh, Mrs Measures, if anything should go wrong with her.’

‘My dear friend, there is no chance of that. It is certainly very unfortunate, but we must do the best we can. Old Mrs Rushton is an excellent sick-nurse, and will doubtless attend to Paula just as well as Mrs Cornes. Is she at the Hall?’

‘Not at present. She has betaken herself home for the night. But can’t we manage without her. Mrs Measures, I can’t tell you how I distrust that woman. I hate to see her about the house, and have only endured her presence for Paula’s sake. But to instal her in the sick-room, to see her handling my wife and child, I don’t think I could stand it. I believe

I should tell her outright all that I think and have thought of her from the commencement, and make a regular breach between us for ever more.'

'But, my dear Mr Rushton, that is very foolish. I quite agree with you that she is odious, but if she can contribute to your dear wife's safety or comfort at this crisis, you must put your personal dislike for her into your pocket. It is absolutely necessary that Paula should have a competent nurse on this occasion, for her own sake and that of the child.'

'Couldn't *you* nurse her?' asked Hal dubiously.

'No, my dear friend, I could not, for several reasons. I am not strong enough for night work, besides, I know nothing about children, and I have my own house and husband to look after. I will be with dear Paula as much as possible during the day, but I cannot undertake any more.'

'Louisa, then?'

'Oh, nonsense. Louisa is only a girl. Such

cases require an experienced woman. If you really cannot get Mrs Cornes to come, you *must* have Mrs Rushton.'

But Hal still hesitated.

'As soon as I have taken you to my darling's side, Mrs Measures,' he said, 'I will drive as hard as I can into Haltham, and see if it is not possible to procure Mrs Cornes. And you will not leave her, I am sure, until I am back again.'

'Of course, I will not leave her,' replied the vicar's wife.

But when she saw Paula she refused to stay at the Hall during Hal's absence unless Mrs Rushton stayed there also. She had seen enough of such cases to know that a very short time might make a great change in the young wife's condition, and she insisted upon Hal's going first to Wavertree Cottage and summoning his stepmother. By this time she did not find him so hard to persuade. He was frightened to death by the sight of Paula's white face and the sound of her stifled moans,

and rushed like a lamplighter to the widow's cottage, where he disturbed her frugal supper by his news.

'Lor', you don't never mean to say so, 'Al,' she cried, as she drew the back of her hand across her mouth. 'Poor dear! Took already! She must 'ave tripped, or summat. I'll go hup, in course, and do my best for 'er, but I do 'ope as you'll catch Mrs Cornes, for I ain't strong enough to sit up at nights.'

'Yes, yes, I am going to drive into Haltham at once for her, Mrs Rushton. But will you come back with me to the Hall now? I shall not feel easy unless I leave you there. Mrs Measures is with her, but she has had no experience.'

'*Mrs Measures*,' repeated the widow, with ineffable scorn. 'Much *she* must know about sich things. I'll walk back with you, 'Al, if you wish it. I ain't finished my supper, but I daresay as I can get a bit and a sup up at the 'All. Ted, my lad, reach me down my shawl and bonnet hoff that 'ook, and don't go to bed yet awhile, has

I'll be a-coming back again if Mrs Cornes takes her proper place to-night.'

'And what about Dr Addison?' inquired Hal fearfully. 'Should I send for him also?'

'Lor', 'Al, no. There'll be no need to trouble 'im, I shouldn't think, before the morning. But I'll be the best judge of that, and Ted here can fetch 'im at any time. And when I comes to think of it, my lad, you'd better come hup to the 'All as well, and then you'll be ready in case of need.'

And so Hal Rushton, too anxious now about his wife to care about any secondary consideration, had to walk back to his house between the unsavoury couple. When he arrived there he found his mare and dog-cart ready for him, and started with all speed for Halt-ham. His errand was eminently unsatisfactory. The proprietors of the house where Mrs Cornes lodged did not even know her present address, nor had any idea when she was expected to return. She made her own engagements, they said, and came and went as she thought proper,

and they never troubled her with any questions. Neither could they tell him of any other nurse to be procured in Haltham. So, sick at heart and wild with anxiety, Hal Rushton turned the mare's head towards Deepdale, and took her home as fast as she could lay her feet to the ground, in order to find out what had happened during his absence.

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